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A Boy From Decatur: A Posthumous Memoir

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A Boy From Decatur
A Posthumous Memoir

by
Lindsey B. Thurman

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A Posthumous Memoir

A Thesis Submitted to the
WKU Honors Program

by
Lindsey B. Thurman

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my great-uncle,
Private First Class Ernest C. Robertson,
whose voice I heard calling me to write his story,
and to my grandfather,
Charles Albert Robertson,
the greatest man I have ever known.

Great thanks are given to Professor Walker Rutledge,
my thesis director and scrupulous editor,
for his unwavering patience throughout this process,
and his sincere interest in Ernest's story.

Preface

Four years ago, Ernest Robertson was a man I heard my grandfather mention in stories of old. He was a soldier who served in the Korean War but who never returned home, not even in a body bag or an urn. He was my great-uncle, whose life history was reduced to a few boxes of creased letters and trinkets. The name Ernest Robertson was empty and unimportant in my mind.

One day, while driving east on the Cumberland Parkway with my mother, we started discussing our family history, and the necessity for someone to jot down all the stories and information my grandparents could tell us while they were alive and alert, so we could have it for posterity long after we were all gone. “You know, my uncle Ernest—now, he would be an interesting person in the family to write about,” Mom said nonchalantly. Feeling like a more ambitious writer than usual on that day, I asked to see the collection of Ernest’s belongings that I knew had been sitting in our attic for some time, and thus a two-year obsession with some other person’s life began.

Writing the story of someone’s life, specifically someone you have never met and never will meet, is an intricate process. My lifestyle as a busy college student limits me from vesting many of my resources into researching, pondering, and recreating all the moments and emotions of Ernest’s life. And

although I consider this particular piece of work a finished product, I certainly hope to devote a portion of my own life to expanding this into a full-fledged novel, chronicling all the details of a man who happened to become a major influence on the way I relate to my ancestry and the people who have been a part of it.

The People Around Ernest

William Wallace Robertson. Born October 6, 1899, in the vicinity of rural Russell County, in southeastern Kentucky, to Charles Marshall and Jana Owens Robertson. Second oldest of thirteen brothers and sisters. Social Security number 400-50-1877. From birth, Wallace was called by his middle name; as a young adult, he completely dropped his given first name. Spent much of his childhood and adolescence working with his family on a farm that may or may not have been owned by them, stripping tobacco or shucking corn. Attended a one-room school through seventh grade, and could both read and write. Was a short man with a stocky stature. His long, oval-shaped face was topped with plain brown hair combed into a neat wave. Every item of clothing he wore would have been handed down or homemade.

Sometime in the 1920's, Wallace married Mollie Edwards. They conceived a son on whose birth certificate Wallace was noted as a 27-year-old white farmer living in the community of Humble. Wallace's first son was born on May 5, 1927. He was named Ernest. The birth certificate records Ernest's name as "Earnest Robertson," but this is the only time such spelling would be used. With his new family, Wallace continued farming in rural south-central Kentucky throughout the planting and harvesting months. Each fall and winter he traveled north to

Illinois to work on wheat farms for extra income. Just a year and one month after his son's birth, Wallace's wife, Mollie, passed away. Two of Wallace's sisters, Maddie and Daisy, helped care for his son while he continued to work. By 1929, Wallace began courting Gladys Hammonds. They were married on October 11, 1930, and had four children together: Eddie, the oldest and notably the black sheep of the family; Jerry, the only girl; Elvis, who died in infancy; and Charles, my grandfather. On November 23, 1930, Wallace wrote a letter from McLean, Illinois, care of John Edwards, Route 3, to his wife:

Mrs. Gladys Robertson, My Darling Wife. Hello Dear Gladys hows this going to find my dear Love just fine I sure hope Dear I am Well and sure hope you the same Darling I sure Would Like to see you this very Day Darling I sure Would Like to see Little Ernest I hope he is Well Dear I Wrote You That I Might be in cincy by Thinksgivin Dear I Dont guess I Will get to as I am helping John finish Husking corn Dear Dont look for me but if We get through in time for me to come I will but Dear it will take 3 Day yet here of corn Husking so that Will be till Wednesday so Dear if I dont [] With you all I hope you all have a Good time Dear I sure am getting tired Husking corn Say Darling how is every body around there these Days Just fine I hope Tell them all hellow for me I would like to see them all Say Darling if I Dont get to come by Thursday Darling Dont think hard of me for I Want to make all the money I can for Work is hard to find now Darling as I Want to get this in the mail I Will close Hoping to hear from you real soon As ever your Loving Husband Wallace to my Darling Wife Gladys So [] bye and be Good alas XXXX

Wallace and Gladys lived in many houses over the next decade, including a two-room house on Decatur Road next to Frank Wade's, a place owned by Grady Meece, Raymond Cravens' house, a house near the creek past Seth Wade's, and a place owned by George Emerson on Patty Ridge Road. Wallace and Gladys would have rented most of these houses, paying their rent by working on the farm. From each place of residence, Wallace used a mule-drawn wagon to transport the following items: a kitchen table, some hard-back chairs, straw-tick mattresses, a dresser, pots, pans, dishes, and oil lamps. In the early 1940s, Wallace moved back to Decatur Road, where he bought a small house with payments of one dollar per month. Wallace and Gladys would live in this two-bedroom house even after each of the four children, Ernest, Eddie, Jerry, and Charles, left home to find work in Cincinnati, join the ARMY, start a family, or otherwise.

Wallace continued to work on the farm adjacent to his house for the next several decades. When he went to church, he attended Poplar Grove Baptist. When the children brought home report cards, he was the signatory. And, when his oldest son, Ernest, went to Cincinnati in 1946 for employment, Wallace made regular visits to the local post office hoping for a letter from his son. Around 1948 or 1949, Wallace's home was put on a postal route where he would continue to receive letters from Ernest, postmarked from places such as Fort Knox, Seattle, and finally Korea, as well as letters from his second oldest son, Eddie, which came out of Hawaii and New Mexico.

On the same day that his father-in-law passed away in late April 1951, Wallace would be visited by postmaster Carl Ruberts, who had one of the few

telephone lines in the area. Ruberts delivered the news to Wallace that Ernest was Missing-In-Action in Korea. Wallace mourned over the unknown whereabouts of his son during the summer of 1951, and after months of form-letter correspondence from the United States government, Wallace received the following letter in the middle of August 1951:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Robertson:

I am writing you relative to your son, Private First Class Ernest C. Robertson, US52000535, Infantry, who was reported missing in action in Korea on 23 April 1951.

A report from your son's organization, Company M, 19th Infantry, reveals that he was reported missing in action following an engagement at Yonggok, North Korea on 23 April 1951. Further information has now been received indicating that he was wounded and subsequently captured. I regret to inform you that despite the attendance of a Chinese physician, your son died in Central Korea on 6 May 1951. No further details are available.

...The office of The Quartermaster General, Washington 25, D.C., is the office of record and the official source of information concerning overseas burials. It is customary for that office to notify the next of kin promptly upon receipt of a report of burial.

I know the sorrow this message will bring you and it is my hope that in time the knowledge of your son's sacrifice for his country may be of sustaining comfort to you.

My heartfelt sympathy is with you in your sorrow.

Sincerely yours,

WM. E. BERGIN

Major General, USA

The Adjutant General

Wallace was named the beneficiary of Ernest's \$10,000 government life insurance policy. With that money, Wallace paid off his farm and house at \$2,900, bought Eddie a new car, and paid for one year's tuition for his daughter, Jerry, to attend Campbellsville University in Campbellsville, Kentucky.

Never completely getting over the loss of his oldest son, Wallace found enjoyment in fishing with Gladys, or with his grandchildren, on Goose Creek, just below his home, or at Wolf Creek Dam in Albany, Kentucky. Many nights, while watching the small black-and-white television in his living room, Gladys, one of the children, or one of the grandchildren would catch Wallace staring at the picture of Ernest in his uniform framed and sitting atop the TV box, not even paying attention to the show.

Wallace died on December 24, 1985. He was survived by three brothers, two sisters, his wife, three children, one brother, five grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Mollie B. Edwards Robertson. Born June 8, 1906, in the vicinity of Casey County, Kentucky. White female. Married Wallace Robertson on an unknown date, probably in the mid-1920's. Gave birth to a legitimate son, Ernest Robertson, on May 5, 1927, at 8:30 p.m, attended by physician, J. B. Tarter.

Occupation listed as housewife. Fell ill in April 1928 and died on June 13, 1928. Certificate of death lists tuberculosis of lungs as the cause of death, attended by physician, J. B. Tarter. Buried at New Friendship Church in Russell Spring, Kentucky, on June 15, 1928 by friends. Jane Robertson, informant.

Maddie and Daisy Robertson. Wallace Robertson's sisters. Helped care for Wallace's one-year-old son, Ernest, after Mollie's death in 1928. According to her nephew, Charles Robertson, "Maddie had an opinion and boy could she get loud."

Gladys Hammonds Robertson. Born October 13, 1906, in the vicinity of Russell County, Kentucky, to Albert Wilson Hammonds and his wife. Second oldest of five children. Attended school briefly and learned to read and write. Grew to be a tall woman, rather unattractive, with very plain, dark hair bobbed at her shoulders. Wearing a hat in almost any picture taken of her, Gladys donned homemade dresses, thick knit stockings, and hard leather shoes.

Gladys met and courted Wallace Robertson in the late 1920's, and she immediately began caring for Wallace's two-year-old son, Ernest, as her own. Gladys and Wallace were married on October 11, 1930. She gave birth to four children during the 1930's: her first biological son, Edwin W. Robertson, on January 19, 1932; her first daughter, Jerry, on April 11, 1933; another son, Elvis Arland, on May 5, 1935, who died of consumption as an infant; and her youngest son, Charles Albert, on October 6, 1938. Gladys would never consider there to be a difference between the children that she bore and her eldest child, Ernest, whom she never legally adopted.

Gladys' home was simple. Her few household items all served a purpose, and everything was used until it was worn out. From the food to the furniture, there was never anything left to spare. Nothing was new. Nails were used to hang clothes in the bedroom, and old buckets became flowerpots in the front yard. Every Christmas, she would put a handful of pretty glass ornaments on her tree, using bobby pins as the hangers. Though she had never seen the inside of an operating room, Gladys performed major surgery on one of my mother's childhood dolls. Having lost its plastic arm all the way up to the socket, the doll was given a prosthetic limb, intricately stitched from muslin material and inserted into the shoulder so securely the doll is still holding up today.

Rare for a woman of such Spartan ways, Gladys hoarded all of Ernest's remaining personal belongings after not returning home from the Korean War. An American flag folded into a tight triangle and a Purple Heart would be kept in the bottom drawer of a dresser in her bedroom, along with a box of creased letters and envelopes addressed by her son and the federal government. She would also keep trinkets from Ernest's childhood. My mother often reminisces of wanting to play with the trinkets as a child, only to be answered by her grandmother with "No, honey. Those are Ernest's pretties." Among these pretties included a metal horse with the initials E. R. scratched onto its belly, a small porcelain zebra, and an unopened pack of cigarettes.

Gladys would age well, but would always be stubborn and set in her ways. She often refused to wear glasses although she needed them, and she would keep her house in the same order as it had always been, hardly ever moving the furniture to different positions. She enjoyed having her grandchildren visit, and

she, too, liked fishing with Wallace on the creek. My fondest picture of her was taken with Wallace sometime in the 1970s. The black-and-white photo looks like one that might be found in a church directory: Gladys sitting in front, Wallace behind her shoulder. Both of them look healthy and positively happy, as though they had been chuckling about something just before the picture was shot.

Gladys died in April 1988. She left behind a Bible, in which the dates of her family members' births and deaths were penned, and a photo album full of unlabeled pictures dating back to the 1890's. She made her youngest son, Charles, the administrator of her will, giving Ernest' Purple Heart to Jerry, a shotgun to Eddie, and the box of letters and documents to Charles. All the household items were sold to Jim Burris, an interested buyer in the community, and the house and farm were sold to Eddie.

Edwin W. Robertson. Born January 19, 1932. The first biological child of Wallace and Gladys Robertson. Went by his childhood nickname, Eddie. His middle initial "W" didn't stand for anything but "W" so far as my grandfather can remember. Though I could never have known for sure, most of my family says that Eddie was born with his nose turned up a little too high. Whether it was his trying to reach the pedestal that his older half-brother Ernest was placed on, or whether it was for attention, Eddie took on the role of the overbearing, obnoxious child in the Robertson family. He attended school at the local schoolhouse and completed all twelve grades. Not to be shown up by Ernest's joining the U. S. Army in 1949, Eddie enlisted soon after. However, Eddie didn't get the chance to play the heroic part in this story. While Ernest was on the front lines in Korea,

Eddie was safely stationed in Hawaii as part of the military police, and when Ernest was killed, Eddie got a free pass to go home.

Of course Wallace and Gladys were glad to see him back home, working in the fields, driving down the dirt road in a new car paid for by Ernest's insurance money. But his younger sister and brother, who probably felt that Ernest was the more likeable sibling, may very well have resented him for being spared. Eddie was not honored for his military service by any kind of award, though it was common knowledge in the family that he coveted Ernest's Purple Heart.

But it was also common knowledge that on some bizarre brotherly level, Eddie and Ernest had always felt a connection to one another. They posed for pictures next to the old Plymouth, and they talked about things that Jerry wouldn't care about because she was a girl and Charles couldn't understand because he was only just a boy. In fact, the last piece of Ernest's life would be in the form of a letter addressed to P.F.C. Edwin W. Robertson, RA 15258995, 516 MP Svc. Co., APO #197, San Francisco, Calif.

April 17 – 1951

----- Korea

Hello Ed;

Just a few lines this morning to say hello. How is this going to find you and what are you doing these days?

Have you gone to the hospital yet? If so, how are you getting along?

I got a letter from Jerry yesterday. She said their school would soon be out. I wish I was yet going to school, how about you?

Boy, things seem to be getting worse over here all the time. I guess you have heard about the rotation, they have set up now, haven't you? If they yet have it, by winter I hope to be out of here. There is quite a few of the boys leaving for the states and Japan, who have been here since last July.

I am going to try and if I can transfer into the 75 mm platoon. I believe I would rather be in that than with the machine guns. I don't much like the idea of having a helmet creased with a machine gun bullet. That's what happened about three days ago.

Well Ed I will close for this time, and try to write again soon.

Ans. Soon

Love Ernest

Eddie would go on to marry a woman by the name of JoAnn. They would move to Cincinnati and give birth to a son, Randy Edmonds Robertson. Randy, a diligent student, was the second member of the Robertson family to attend college, preceded only by cousin Raymond Lewis Cravens. This added to the already mounting friction between Eddie's half of the family and my grandfather's half.

For much of the rest of his life, Eddie worked at Shilitoe's TV Repair Service in Cincinnati. Every several weeks, Eddie would come home for a brief visit, seeing that very few things had changed since his last stay. My grandfather vividly remembers a time in the mid-1970s when Wallace and Gladys' television set was broken and they asked Eddie to fix it for them because they couldn't justify spending money on something so frivolous. It was said that Eddie told

them he spent his entire week fixing TV's and he didn't want to do work on the weekends. It took him two weeks to agree to fix it for them the next time he came home.

Eddie stayed in Cincinnati throughout his parents' last years, and Jerry eventually moved to Ohio as well, leaving Charles solely responsible for taking Wallace and Gladys to doctor appointments, mowing their yard, buying their groceries, and making sure they were safe and comfortable. Eddie would come to Kentucky for both Wallace's and Gladys' funerals, but retreated north just days after each burial. He didn't understand why Charles wanted to auction the old home after their deaths, and argued that it needed to be kept in the family even though he couldn't be there to help with the upkeep or chip-in on insurance. Charles offered to sell it to Eddie, but he declined. In 1989, Eddie made a final visit to Decatur where he would meet Jerry and Charles to go through the contents of the house and take what sentimental items they wanted. On that day, Eddie stormed in, pulling open all the dressers and drawers in search of Ernest's Purple Heart. Gladys had willed it to Jerry, however, and Charles made sure the will was carried out. Eddie left the house in a fury with Ernest's tightly folded flag, a shotgun, and Wallace's watch, which he later gave to Randy. My grandfather only spoke to Eddie a handful of times between that day and the day Eddie died in 1997.

Jerylene Robertson. Born on April 11, 1933. The only baby girl in the Robertson family. According to Gladys' Bible, her name was spelled Jerylene, but

as many young girls would, she would go by several spellings, including Jeraldine, Jerry, and most commonly Jerry.

Jerry was the “fun” Robertson child. She had a vivacious personality and was always up for a laugh, but she could pull out an ornery streak when she felt like it. She was aware of the advantages that came with being the only female sibling, and when she didn’t want to help with the chores, she simply held her side and complained of being tired and sore.

Only five years older than her youngest brother Charles, Jerry would help change his diapers and claimed to have carried him around as though he were her baby doll. I remember sitting with her once when she and her husband, Fred, came to Kentucky for a visit, and after teasing my grandfather for a moment or two, she leaned close to me and said, “Charles always was my favorite brother.”

Jerry was still in school at Russell County High when Ernest was in Korea, and she was often mentioned in his letters. After his death, she attended Campbellsville University for one year. Not being the most devoted student, Jerry left school and married Fred Gibbs, who was a first-cousin to the Gibbs made famous in the NASCAR circuit. They moved to Cincinnati sometime in the mid-fifties. Jerry and Fred named their first son after Jerry’s oldest brother, nicknaming him Ernie. Ernie was a brilliant young boy—some people even found him peculiar because of his odd intelligence in spite of an absence of social skills. Today he might have been classified as autistic. Living in the late 1950’s and 60’s, Ernie’s mind was ahead of his time. He had a talent for drawing, and many of his drawings were of futuristic spaceships and aircrafts that actually appeared

in popular culture in the 70's and 80's. Ernie was never a completely healthy child, and at age seventeen he died from a rare kidney disease.

Jerry also had a daughter named Sandy, who inherited her mother's bubbly characteristics. Sandy married a man named Jeff and together they had three children. They currently live in Cincinnati and are devoted NASCAR fans.

A lifelong smoker, Jerry was diagnosed with lung cancer, and she died in February 2004. Her husband of -- years passed months later. She was survived by her "favorite brother" Charles, her daughter, three grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

Elvis Arland Robertson. Born on May 5, 1935, exactly eight years after his half-brother, Ernest. Died as an infant of consumption on --, 1935.

Charles Albert Robertson. Born on October 6, 1938. The youngest child of Wallace and Gladys Robertson. In payment for attending his wife at Charles' birth, Wallace gave the doctor, J. B. Tarter, four frying chicken. Though he was the baby of the family, Charles never received special treatment. His clothes and toys were hand-me-downs, and his hands were always dirty from working around the farm as soon as he was old enough. Christmas mornings would find Charles fishing a single orange or apple out of his stocking, if it were a good year. One December, Charles remembers the only gift he got was a tiny rabbits foot from his sister, Jerry.

Charles grew up poor, but living in Decatur, he never would have known any other way of life. Pictures of him show pants that were a little too short in the

wintertime, and, as a teen, capture him petting a mangy, underfed dog he named Snoopy. After completing eighth grade at the local schoolhouse, Charles would walk nearly a mile each day out of the cove to meet the bus that would take him to Russell Springs High School. He made fine marks, played basketball a little, and he met a younger, popular girl from Webb's Crossroads named Janice Foley. Charles graduated in 1957, courting Jan during his senior year. With another couple, Charles and Jan would go on dates at Wolf Creek Dam, sitting on the grass above the lake, smoking cigarettes for hours. Jan left school before finishing twelfth grade to marry Charles in a pastor's home, just off Main Street in Russell Springs. Like his older siblings, Charles took Jan to Cincinnati where he could find work. Living with Jerry and her husband, Fred, Charles worked at a factory that produced playing cards, and Jan was a secretary. They were married just two years when Jan gave birth to their first child, Mitchell Charles Robertson, in 1960. Two years later, they had a daughter, Victoria Susan, or Vicki Sue as she was usually called. This is my mother.

Around 1965, Charles and Jan decided to move back home. They found a tiny house in Torch Ridge, which was on the lower end of Decatur. Charles drove a school bus every morning and afternoon, and worked the farm during the rest of the day. Though they were poor as they had ever been, the family was happy. Mitch and Vicki ran up the dusty road to Grandma Robertson's house for lunch in the summer, and they swam in Greasy Creek on hot autumn days. They stayed in Russell County until Mitch and Vicki were midway through elementary school, and then moved to Nancy, Kentucky, where they would live for the next thirty-five years. Charles took a job at General Electric in Somerset, where he retired in

1995. As of today, he has two grandchildren, and he enjoys carpentry and spending time on eBay.

2

The Lay of the Land

Decatur

Decatur was a homespun community lying five miles off the 127 highway, a microscopic blood platelet clinging to the vein that dissects Russell County in southern Kentucky. It was surrounded by other rural neighborhoods, such as Webb's Crossroads, Eli, Ono, and Torch Ridge, all of which similarly branched from the main road in poorly paved asphalt, crumbling into a gravel and then dirt path. Today, Decatur is nothing more than a pothole that local sixteen-year-old boys run their mud-trucks over as they drive out to the country to hunt deer. A place that used to have its own zip code now only has a beat-up road sign crookedly sticking up from the ground.

In case you aren't from around those parts, the emphasis is on *De-*, because we're in Kentucky. All of the syllables have long vowel sounds, except for the *-ur*, which is given a tobacco-pocketed lip slur *-errr*. In any other place in the world, it might be pronounced phonetically and probably even respelled to look more pleasing to the eye. But people who lived in Decatur wouldn't have cared how it looked. Most of them couldn't read anyway.

Back then, Decatur still wasn't much. A little cove off the highway where a few of the poorer farmers had a speck of land. Clotheslines with garments

yellowed from sweat and toil stretched across back yards, front yards, anywhere there was spare room. No suburbia chatting between housewives while folding crisp dress shirts into a wicker basket. Instead, dusty, dirty outhouses and barns where the older kids were sent to sleep when there were younger ones who needed beds in the house.

I hardly remember the last time I went out to my great-grandparents' place in the long-since-dead community of Decatur. By then it had already been swallowed up by the modest county seat of Russell Springs, but it was still known by its original name in my family. I was less than three years old, and no taller than the height of the tailgate of my dad's truck when it was let down. Grandma and Grandpa Robertson were dead, or so I was told, and we were there to move the last of their belongings out of the tired, old house. My memory wasn't developed enough to remember that I had visited their house every Christmas and Easter since I was born, and it certainly wasn't developed enough to remember a black-and-white photo in a gold-plated frame sitting on top of their television set, either.

So, there I was, toddling around unsupervised in the springy grass, picking clover or picking my nose, I don't know which, when I bumped into the tailgate's rusty corner. *Yaowull!*, I cried, small spots of blood dripping down my forehead, larger spots of green and blue kaleidoscopes fuzzing up my brain. I'm sure my mother came running to me, scooping up my mud-caked bottom and cleaning my wound with drops of well water from the kitchen sink.

That's all I can remember about that day, and for years no one in my family thought to tell me any more. It wasn't important. Obviously I didn't care.

We were there to divvy up my great-grandparents' things, to wrap them in the community section of the newspaper, to pack them away in the basement of our respective homes and not look at them until years later when our own great-grandchildren continued the cycle.

My grandfather says that we were doing that, or, the adults were doing that—saying, “Do you want this? If not I’ll pitch it,” and “Grandma always loved the *Readers Digest*, now we better keep all 200 copies she kept in the attic.” They were sifting through the meaningful and meaningless when they came upon the curio cabinet that held some important things. A tight, triangular piece of folded material and a Purple Heart medallion. A wooden coffee mug with a porcelain zebra toy inside. A pack of cigarettes. A shoebox full of dingy faded letters.

“Those are mine, Charles. Mother said Ernest’s things were going to be mine.”

“Now, Eddie,” my grandpa said to his brother, the one person in my family I’ve never met but have always heard spoiled stories about, “Now you know I want some of Ernest’s things too.”

A cool breeze fluttered through the nearby window, not cool enough to prevent hot tempers and brotherly rifts from flaring.

“Just let me have them, Charles. I was in the Service, I know what Ernest went through. That Purple Heart should have been mine and Mom said she was giving it to me!”

“Well, we should at least keep everything together, put it in a safety box at the bank!”

And then a *Yaowull* from the front yard where my dad's truck was backed up to the open barn doors.

Some people ran out to get me, others stayed in the house. The day was over. Everything was packed up in a matter of minutes. My grandfather walked away with a pile of letters. My grandfather's brother took a shotgun. My grandfather's sister took a special medallion. Everything was silent.

Until the screen door slammed shut one last time and the trucks' ignitions roared through the holler.

When we left Decatur that day, we knew it was still going to be there. Right down the road from the house we live in now, that nasty pothole in the road that no one should care to remember actually used to be a place, a home. But I guess inside that pothole were memories, tears, broken feelings. Decatur must have been something painful, because it took nearly twenty years to get my mother to take me back there.

Landscaping

It's summer, fall, winter, spring again. The same old place on the same old road. Decatur, Kentucky.

Turn off of a main highway, where rickety cars pass only once or twice an hour, onto a gravel road shaded by elderly trees and wild bushes. The ground is hard. Packed tight under years of movement in and out of the cove. It's sandy brown, and it looks sunburned after a long rain. Bits of rock jutting up make it uneven; slippery in cold months and nature's perfect pumice under bare feet during the rest of the year.

Follow the path in snaking curves, back, back, back until the trees break and a homespun community appears. A piece of land on the right side of the road, that's the Cravens' place. Not much to it, just a one-level house that needs new paint and a sleepy shed in the back. Across the road, there is a tobacco barn where huge leaves hang to dry under a corroded red roof. Crickets chirp all day long. Birds breathe country air, tinged with dust that catches in their pin-sized throats.

On down and around a turn, a portion of the road veers off to the right and narrows. The grass is rugged here, but the tree line is lush and colorful. Dogwoods, maples, oaks, and then another expanse where a one-room schoolhouse once stood. Cobwebs and birdnests hung in the low rafters, and the smell of grime and work hung even lower in the springtime. In the fall, neighbor kids would have walked here both morning and afternoon because, if you wanted to eat lunch, you had to walk back home. A teacher's bell would ring out, and the crunching of orange leaves would roar as the line to get back inside the school funneled through a narrow doorway. School was only in session when you didn't have to be on the farm, helping Daddy with the crops, and it ended at the eighth grade, unless you had a ride to the county high school ten miles down the highway.

Turn around and come out of the schoolhouse chamber, a hot summer sun beating down to make everything tired and thirsty. The road slopes down some more, exposing the Robertson place to the left. No telephone lines, no electric generators. Just tall weeds pushed up against a rough fencerow, ending in a homely walkway up to the front door of a small house. Shallow cooper barrels

packed with soil and a bush or two sat in the tiny yard. Pictures were taken in front of these bushes on Easter Sunday, and the front bumper of the oldest son's first car was parked so close to the pots the shiny metal car part couldn't be seen.

Making a square angle to the house was the tobacco barn, just a handful of yards away. It too had rusty sheets secured to its roof, which popped and bent under the weather. Hymns were hummed on the walk out to the barn each morning to get started working, and as the sun rose into a clean sky, a chicken or two might wander into the yard. To the side of the barn and house was the tobacco field. As a child, my mother would sit on the tailgate of her Grandpa Robertson's truck and look out at these fields with a cheap canvas and primary-color paints. She painted the barn and the slumped, golden tobacco with pre-teenage precision: the solid green grass and the red roof that looked far too new to be a reality accentuated the color of her world. The delicate mixture of scents and sights and breezes that made the farm tingle all over wasn't exactly conveyed in the painting. Looking at the farm should make you feel as if you were listening to someone pick sad notes out of a guitar, or watching a glass of iced tea sweat on a front porch step, or tasting the bitter air inside the dark tobacco barn. A stark contrast against my mother's two-dimensional depiction, initialed in the bottom corner, VSR. This painting hangs in my grandparents' home now, and has been promised to me someday.

Around a last curve in the road the gravel tapers off into a pool of murky water, sustained by the dissecting Greasy Creek at the holler's lowest elevation. Baptisms, picnics (when there was time), skipping rocks, and swimming were common occurrences on the creek while it was still warm out. Flat pebbles,

glazed with greenish slime, covered the floor of the pond, and the sound of running water never ceased. Surrounded by shadowy hills, the creek let off steam on winter mornings as the earth thawed from its frost the night before, bringing the bare tree limbs into focus from the haze. It felt safe, enclosed, like home on that creek.

Other families thrived around the creek bed: The Ruberts, the Meecees, and the Wades, who had a miniature general store and acting post office until a rural route came through the area. Surrounded by Patty Ridge to the south and Torch Ridge to the northeast, Decatur was a perfect example of a settlement that would have taken place hundreds of years earlier: A body of water centrally located and accessible to all its inhabitants, and protection around three sides by the ridgeline.

3

Ernest's Life

Beginnings

It was a recorded birth, just like any other. The Commonwealth of Kentucky's State Board of Health said that Ernest Robertson was the first child of a farmer and a housewife whose address came out of the community post office in Humble, Kentucky. William Wallace Robertson, age 27, and Mollie Edwards Robertson, age 20, were the proud parents of a new set of hands that would play in the dirt, strip tobacco, and hold the title of firstborn. Work, marry, get old, and die. That was the plan for Ernest's life. That was life then.

J. B. Tarter was the attending physician on May 5, 1927, the night Ernest was born. The small farmhouse filled with mother's cries of pain, son's cries for life, and father's cries of worry about feeding a new mouth. A cool spring breeze came through the open windows, taunting the glow of the oil-burning lamps and helping to ease the birthing odors. They would have wrapped him up in ragged quilts. He would have worn cloth diapers safety-pinned at the sides. It would have been a nice little family. Quaint, poor, but nice.

Discarded Tissue

Mollie Edwards Robertson gave birth to her first and only son, Ernest, on May 5, 1927. The young, frail mother tried suckling her son to a fruitless breast, praying there was enough to fill his belly. She caressed the tender lump behind his left ear, a lump that would impair his hearing and keep him from enlisting in the Navy years later. She rocked him to sleep, whispering hand-me-down tales of far away lands into his dreams. She held her infant tightly in his knit cap and leather booties, hopelessly gazing past Wallace's field for a reprieve to her ailing body, as the last black-and-white photo of mother and son was taken before her death in the spring of '28.

Ernest didn't feel his biological mother giving painful birth to him, and he would not remember the blanket of her powdery scent. He would never know what love felt like from the woman whose umbilical cord nurtured him for nine short months. He would never miss the person he had never really known.

Gladys Hammonds was a robust woman who had thick, tobacco-stripping hands that were like sandpaper in the crook of a baby's fleshy neck. Pinned tightly against her head, her hair pulled her droopy eyes taut, giving her a hard look. She worked the fields. She shelled the corn. She broke the horses.

She did not have children.

Though Gladys was still a young girl by generational terms, the sun-baked lines across her forehead added to her age, making it harder to find a husband with the passing of every harvest. She had not known the existence of the love she was about to encounter until she met Wallace Robertson, a farmer from the neighboring community of Decatur, Kentucky. For Wallace not only brought

with him a meager offering of a ramshackle house and enough food to keep them from starving, but he also brought his year-old son who had not known love, either.

Gladys certainly didn't have the predisposition to be a mother right away, but it only took minutes, seconds, for her insides to soften as she held Wallace's baby. No, she had not been there when the cord was cut, instantly shriveling against Ernest's navel. Nor had she experienced the first few post-natal months that typically foster a deep connection between mothers and their babies. Gladys didn't have the beginning of Ernest's life, but she did have the rest of it.

She sang him different lullabies than he had heard from the throat of his biological mother. She would cook the growing boy home recipes that he might not have otherwise had. And though she still had a hard exterior, Gladys's heart grew fast as corn stalks to contain the boy.

When the proofs came back from Ernest's first picture day in high school, she put the black-and-white photo in the best frame she had, its narrow strips of gold-plated metal illuminating the farm-boy's face. This was the picture Gladys would stare at for hours and hold close to her chest all the days Ernest was in the plains of Korea. This was the frame that would sit on top of the small television in the living room for years after his death in a POW camp. This was the son whose boyhood debris she kept in a cabinet, refusing to chance the loss of "Ernest's pretties."

Mothers and sons often share a connection that runs purer than the oxygen-rich umbilical blood. Although the narrow tissue tube tying Mommy to her baby is discarded within minutes of birth, a love—a trust—an unbreakable

bond remains. But not all motherly bonds begin with the cord, and the severance of the cord certainly does not equal the pain that a mother experiences when she loses her son.

Starting a Life

What kind of baby remembers being a baby? I guess I cried a lot and wet myself. And I guess things looked pretty big to me. Well, there is one picture of me, Dad holding me, and I think it was on Easter Sunday. I'm wearing a ruffled baby dress and cap and we're having a picture taken outside. If Dad sat me down on the ground, I would have heard a screech to pick me back up, I was going to get dirty like that. And I'd say Dad's hands were just as dirty because I don't know if you ever get that many years' work washed out from under your fingernails.

There were chickens pecking around all the time and I think I wanted to chase them, even though I couldn't crawl yet. But when I could crawl, I wonder how many times I went missing. I know there wasn't many people around, but everyone did keep busy.

Sometimes I'm pretty sure I can remember when my birth mother wasn't there anymore, after she died. I'd say I felt a difference when Daisy and Maddie started holding me and kissing my baby cheeks all the time. And Dad was gone a lot more, always working. They probably made me smell good all the time and gave me baths in that water basin. For babies, they heat the water real good, but when you get older, the water gets cooler. Your skin gets tough and

you can take it colder so there's less time spent heating and more time for other things.

But I really can remember my mom when I was little. Well, Gladys. But I remember her telling me, "You don't cry now," and "Go on back out there and hem up that chicken for supper." Course I was walking and exploring by that time. Chewing on a ripe tobacco leaf when no one was looking. And I put my initials on everything cause I wanted to own it. Well, we didn't own anything much, but I thought we did. I scratched my initials on the belly of this metal horse with a rusted jackknife I found on the side of the road once. But now I'm getting into when I was older, probably 8 or 10.

That's about all that I know specific-wise. Life was hard, we all knew it. But then it wasn't, too. Some days it could be real easy.

A Poem to Substitute for Boyhood

Kicking rocks down the road as he walked in aged shoes,
maybe tying up a fishing rod to
dip into the creek.
Stripping corn, shelling beans.
Going to bed when the sun went down.
No lights beyond candles.
Fashioning a strip of metal into a hoop
to shoot a basketball through
and nailing it to the side of the barn
when there was no basketball
in the first place.
Making C's and D's on report cards each term
at the local schoolhouse.
Teachers comment,
"Shy and quiet."

School Days

Like his teachers said, Ernest was a rather quiet boy. He had friends and was well liked, but he could almost always be found lost in thought. Not necessarily a daydreamer type, just continually running an interior monologue that he must have listened to very intently.

Ernest went to Decatur School—that was the name of it. A tiny one-room schoolhouse off of Decatur Road that taught students through the eighth grade. Over the years, some of Ernest's teachers included Lillian Roy, Wheeler Wade, and Ora Wade. His highest marks were in spelling, reading, and writing, while arithmetic and U.S. History subjects hardly ever earned grades higher than a D. Ernest's attendance record, however, was impeccable—during the seventh and eighth grades, Ernest only missed one day of school.

When his days at the Decatur School had run out, Ernest continued his education at Russell Springs High School. Since there was no bus service that ran as far out as Decatur, Ernest took up driving himself and other kids from around the community to the high school which was about six or seven miles away. His grades didn't improve in high school, and they were generally consistent with past marks.

Quiet as ever, he played basketball and softball for three years in high school. He was also a member of the Future Farmers of America in 1944, and was a member of the 4-H club for in '44 and '45. His graduation announcements say that he was participating in the Russell Springs High School Commencement Exercises on Friday evening, May 2, 1947 at eight o'clock at the Methodist Church. The class prophecy, which was written by one of Ernest's peers starts

with this prologue: “Back in the year 1947 the Seniors agreed to meet in Russell Springs for a reunion ten years after graduation. We kept that rendezvous. On August 31, 1957 the Powell Hotel dining hall rang with cheery greetings from members of the old gang. We were each delighted, thrilled or amazed to learn of the respective heights our classmates had reached.” The writer goes on to list the prophesied occupations of her classmates. Ernest Robertson was said to be a merchant at Webb’s Crossroads, the community at the mouth of Decatur, right on Highway 127.

Ernest didn’t go on to college, like his first-cousin Raymond Lewis Cravens, although I think he might have liked to. Instead, he signed up for the Selective Service and hitched up to Cincinnati, Ohio where he would work and wait for a ticket to one of those far-away lands, deeply embedded into his soul by a lullaby, that I believe was on his mind all the time he was lost in thought.

April 16, 1946

Ernest receives a Certificate of Fitness from the Selective Service System after his examination. There are five boxes that can be checked, each one representing a different level of fitness. Option number three, “Physically fit, acceptable by Navy, including Marine Corps, Coast Guard,” is scratched out with heavy pencil marks. Option number one, “Physically fit, acceptable by Army for general military service,” is checked. Signed A. W. Brumfield, 1st Lt. AUS.

May 2, 1946

Ernest receives a Notice of Classification card from the Selective Service. Stamped by the Local Board No. 147 of Jamestown, Kentucky, the card states: “Ernest Clifford Robertson, Order No. 11,533, has been classified in Class 1-A.” In his neatest, tightest handwriting, Ernest signs his name at the top of the card. Printed on the bottom of the card are the words “*The law requires you*, to have this notice in your personal possession at all times—to exhibit it upon request to authorized officials—to surrender it, upon entering the armed forces, to your commanding officer.”

On the same day, an Order to Report for Induction is mailed to Ernest’s home. The words are harsh and have no emotion: “Having submitted yourself to a local board composed of your neighbors for the purpose of determining your availability for training and service in the land or naval forces of the United States, you are hereby notified that you have now been selected for training and service therein. You will, therefore, report to the local board named above at Local Draft Board Office, Jamestown, Kentucky, at 6:00 a.m. on the 14th day of May 1946. This local board will furnish transportation to an induction station. You will there be examined, and, if accepted for training and service, you will then be inducted into the land or naval forces. Persons reporting to the induction station in some instances may be rejected for physical or other reasons. It is well to keep this in mind in arranging your affairs, to prevent any undue hardship if you are rejected at the induction station.”

Letter to Ernest from Drewey Meece, Jr.

May 10, 1946

Hello Ernest,

Mr. Aaron told me to send you a buck to help on the expense to Columbia yesterday.

I'm enclosing a self-addressed envelope, so please drop me a line so I'll know you got it.

I noticed in the paper where you were leaving for military service; so "best of luck."

Your friend,

Drewey Meece, Jr.

First Draft

Ernest hadn't even finished high school before Washington officials were seeking him out. They wanted him because he was a young, healthy male. Also, because he was a born and bred farm boy and tough enough to sustain front line fighting. Ernest did his civic duty by signing up for the Selective Service, but I wonder if he ever truly thought they would call him up. I wonder if, when they sent him notification that he was a hot commodity, he was secretly happy: putting on a strong front for Dad and Mom who didn't want him to leave home, but energized and fulfilled within at the prospect of getting to go somewhere he had only read about in his history books. I think Ernest must have been prepared to start a new life the day after he graduated because, like the Order to Report for

Induction suggested, he had a backup plan to live and work in Cincinnati until the day he finally got the call...even though it would be nearly four years later.

Working Papers

The next tangible record of Ernest's life isn't until mid-1948. But there are memories that serve to explain what happened in the meantime. Ernest had hoped to be accepted into the Navy. There was more money in the Navy, better benefits, and it was a much safer position to be in as opposed to general land forces. When Ernest reported for his examination on April 16, 1946, the physician found a large scar and sunken place behind his left ear. He also found that Ernest was hardly able to hear on that side. Being physically healthy in every other way, Ernest was cleared for service in the Army, but not in the Navy. He was nothing special. Just your basic private first class.

Upon reporting to the Local Board on May 14, 1946, Ernest was sent to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he would await training. Luckily, there was family in Cincinnati that he could stay with: Eris Hammonds, Gladys' brother; Recty Hammonds Robertson, Gladys' sister; Lee and Eva Robertson, Wallace's brother and sister-in-law. Ernest would get a job at Globe-Wernekie office supply factory for a period of time, followed by a job at Carthage Mills, always sending portions of his paycheck home to Dad and Mom. Driving his 1936 Plymouth sedan, Ernest visited home when he could.

He also courted a girl named Helen for some time. My grandfather believes that Helen's last name was Taylor, but we all tell him he's just thinking of the female love interest on *The Andy Griffith Show*. We know that Helen was

originally from Rockcastle County, which is about 60 miles north of Decatur, but the specifics of how she and Ernest met are fuzzy.

Letter home

Postmarked June 25, 1948, Cincinnati, Ohio

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello and to let you know that everyone up here is o.k.

Well I got a job and started working in the same department with Eris. I started working Tuesday morning.

I was over at Lee's for a while last night, they are all well.

I guess I will stay with Eris as we go to work at the same time.

Ans. soon,

Ernest

Letter home

Circa 1948, Hartwell, Ohio

Dear Dad and Mom:

Just a few lines this morning to say hello and that I am o.k.

How is this going to find everyone down there and what are you doing today.

As for me I don't guess I will do anything much for the boys I run around with are in Casey County.

I would have come down there, but I needed to work Saturday, for I won't get to work but four days this week as I have to register Friday or Saturday.

I went over at uncle Lee's Saturday night and stayed all night; Eva was in bed sick.

Well I will close for now.

Answer soon,

Ernest

The Sick

I believe it was customary, in the days when letters were still an important and respected form of communication, to let family know if a person were sick. Even if that person would most likely be back to health before the letter arrived at its destination.

Letter home

Circa 1948, Hartwell, Ohio

Dear Dad and Mom,

Just a few lines to say hello and that I am o.k. How is this going to find everyone down there? I have been working the first shift since I came back from down home, but I go on the second shift this evening. I was up at Eris's a while last night, Recty and Bernice had gone to the show.

If I can save up enough money I may buy me a car about the first of December if I don't have to go to the army by that time.

This winter I won't get to work on Saturdays and I want a way to come down on Friday nights when I want too.

I can get a nice ford coupe for \$350. and I think I can have that much by then.

Well I will close for now answer soon.

Ernest

Aspirations

Here's another insight to Ernest's personality: he was certainly a planner, or at least a dreamer. Thinking ahead to days when he could afford a car of his own, down to the make and model, Ernest was searching for something more in life. He had a deep and aching urge to go places, pave a way for himself, and find an excuse not to have to go back to the family farm in Decatur.

Letter home

Postmarked October 25, 1948, Hartwell, Ohio

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello and that I am O.K.

How is this going to find everyone down there and what is everyone doing, working though I guess.

I worked every day this last week, that will make my check look a litter better I hope.

I was over at Lee's last night and stayed all night, Eva is better and is at home now. She said she had been home for over a week now. Uncle Lee paid me the five dollars he owed me last night.

Well I don't know anything much to write so I will close for now.

Ans. soon,

Ernest

Letter home

Postmarked November 1, 1948, Hartwell, Ohio

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello, how is this going to find everyone down there?

I have just got up. I don't have to go to work until eleven o'clock tonight. I sure do dread that shift for the first few nights.

I guess you can strip tobacco if the weather down there is like it is here. It has been foggy and raining since yesterday.

I seen Eris's yesterday. And Recty. Recty and I went over to Marvin's a while yesterday evening.

Well I don't know anything much to write so I will close for now.

Ans. soon,

Ernest

Undertow

Sometimes I just can't get home out of my head. The weather, the cigarette I'm smoking, talking to Eris or Recty—everything translates to the

family on the farm. I can see Dad out there, overalls sagging underneath the sweat and muggy air, stripping tobacco. I'm sure if I think hard enough, I can even feel the creek's cool water over my feet. But I know, hard as it is, I don't want to be back there. It's like I'm swimming in an ocean larger than life, and I could keep going for miles and miles before I ever looked back. No matter how hard I slap my body or kick my feet against the waves, there's an undertow, strong and steady, that won't let me forget where I'm from and constantly keeps me from swimming outside home waters.

Letter home

Postmarked November 15, 1948, Hartwell, Ohio

Dear Dad and Mom

Just a few lines to say hello and that I am O.K. How is this going to find everyone down there, fine I hope.

I was over at Lee's last night and stayed all night. I have just got home and thought I would write a few lines.

I don't got to work until eleven o'clock tomorrow night, that is a long time just to fool around.

Well I will close for now as there isn't anything much to write so answer soon

Ernest

Letter home

Dated November 17, 1948

31 Decamp Ave

Hartwell 15 Ohio

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello and that I am fine. How is this going to find everyone down there?

I got you letters yesterday and was glad to get them, tell Jerry this will do for all as I don't know anything much to write and that I want to get to bed, I have just got home from work.

I am working from eleven o'clock at night until seven in the morning.

I haven't seen Recty since she came back up here. She is staying at Marvin's now.

I would like to be down and go hunting Thanksgiving but I guess I'll have to work on Friday and Saturday.

Well don't work too hard and answer soon.

Ernest

P.S. Mrs. Jasper said she had a living room suit she was going to sell and she wondered if you

That's really how the letter ended.

November 26, 1948

Ernest receives a document from the Selective Service System. An Order to Report for Armed Forces Physical Examination at the U.S. Army Recruiting Station on 8th & Walnut Sts., Cincinnati, Ohio, at 7:45 a.m. on the 3rd of December, 1948. It states, "Go direct to the Army Recruiting Office. Tell them you are from Board 51." All of the names and dates are typed onto the document with a typewriter. Everything else is printed and generic. Sent from Washington, D.C., to Local Boards across the country. Sent from Local Boards across the country to young men waiting for their turn to serve.

December 21, 1948

Ernest applies for unemployment compensation. A thin blue quarter-sheet of paper headed with Separation Report for Total Unemployment by employer, Carthage Mills Inc., 124 W. 66th St., Cincinnati 16, Ohio. Last day worked, December 16, 1948. Earnings in calendar week in which separation occurred, over \$21.00. Reason for separation, Joined the U.S. Army.

Another Fill-In-The-Blank

The problem with looking back is that you can't remember everything. I sit here on my bed at night, typing on a sleek silver laptop. I think about what I had for dinner and what time I woke up this morning, and that's about as far as I can get without having to pause and...nope, yesterday is a blur. And then I refocus on my work, continuing to type, thinking about Ernest and what he might have had for dinner and what time he might have woken up on any given day.

I sift through the 2-inch thick binder that holds plastic sleeves containing what is left of his life. December 1948 feels so real to me. I can see him, tall and awkward, asking for a leave slip from his employer. I can feel him signing away his life to the Army. I ache to have the ability to put him back on that farm in Decatur and keep him from harm.

A quick flip of the page and I'm thrust into 1950. Wait—what happened? A year is gone and I don't even remember it?

Where is 1949?

My grandfather believes that Ernest was still working in Cincinnati. My grandmother says, "Oh, Charles—surely he came back home for a while." The truth between their blurry memory of half a century ago is that there are no documents, no letters, pertaining to Ernest from 1949. It's like the year was either so bad that his parents didn't want to remember it and therefore threw out its sentiments, or the year was so good that there was no need for stern reminders to Report for This or Order to That.

If I could fill in the blank for 1949, I would say that Ernest was still working in Cincinnati, visiting Eris or Lee when he had the time. Taking a sack lunch down to the factory's cafeteria at 3 a.m. and pulling out a ham-and-cheeseloaf sandwich. Pulling the very last fleck of tobacco out of his cigarette before hitting the pillow for the night. And making his way down home when he could—a four-hour drive, or more, on those old, curvy roads—to visit Dad and Mom. Maybe hunt a quail or two. Maybe soak his feet in Greasy Creek that summer.

Time is rushing past, and I'm pushed back into 1950. I have to get on with the story—there's still a lot more to tell. My nose is buried in the letters once again, and as I flip back a few pages to reference one of my post-it notes, I catch myself: Wait, where's 1949? It's been just a few moments—year's worth of a few moments—and I've already forgotten.

Letter home

Written January 20, 1950

Saturday morning

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello, How is everyone? I am just fine and am having a fine trip so far.

I don't guess you can read this for I can't hardly write on the train.

It is almost time for dinner, and we have just crossed over the Iowa and Minnesota state line.

Tell Charles if he was up here he could really make a snow man. The snow is almost knee deep look like.

We had quite a while in Chicago yesterday. I got there about eight o'clock yesterday and left at six last night.

Well I can't think of anything much to write and I can't write on this train anyway so I will close for now.

Ernest

Puzzle Pieces and Korean Matadors

Another bump in the proverbial road. January 1950: Ernest is on a train headed out west. I know this because of the letter he sent home. Next thing I know, he's getting another Order to Report for Armed Forces Physical Examination on 29 July 1950. Seven full months of nothing? Plus, I'm starting to get skeptical. How many times are they going to examine this boy before they let him do something? It's like waving a red flag in front of a bull that's penned up so it can't buck and toss its head around to get the anger out for four years. I would think Ernest was getting restless. Just give him a yes or no; is he in, or is he out? But I guess, like that bull, when the gate flies open, you'd better watch out because there's a pent-up machine-gunner on the loose and he's ready to tear the Korean matadors apart.

Letter home

Written September 17, 1950

Fort Knox, KY

Dear Dad and Mom

Just a few lines to say hello, and that I am fine. How is this going to find everyone down there?

Well I thought all the time until yesterday that I would go to Texas or Oklahoma for my basic, but I will be over here for the next fourteen weeks.

I guess we will start training tomorrow, I don't know what it will be like for I am in the tank division. They don't give anyone much choice anymore, for I passed the officers candidate test and they put us in this division.

How is Papa getting along, tell him and all of them I said hello.

Have you all about got all the tobacco cut, or is it yet raining most every day?

I went over to the service club last night and played bingo for about an hour.

Well I don't know much else to write, so answer soon to the address on this envelope.

"Ernest"

(On the envelope: Rct. Ernest C. Robertson, US 52000535, Co. B" 761 Tk. Bn. Div. TRAINS., 3rd Armored Division, Fort Knox, Kentucky.)

Basic Training

A handful of letters came home throughout late September and early October, most of them talking about Helen and how she came to see Ernest at the base. "Say was I surprised last Saturday evening. Helen came down about two o'clock and stayed for about two hours. Her brother and his wife brought her down" (September 25, 1950). And, "I don't know what you will say and think when you hear that I got a twenty four hour pass Saturday afternoon. I would sure like to have come down there but Helen and her brother was down here on Saturday afternoon. I went with them over to Shelbyville and stayed all night. I really did have a nice trip, I came back in last night about seven or eight o'clock. I will be down the next pass I get" (October 16, 1950).

Letter home

Written October 22, 1950

Fort Knox, Kentucky

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello and that I am fine. How is this going to find everyone down there? What is everyone doing these days? It sure had been raining here at Fort Knox today.

Well I didn't get a pass this weekend, and I don't know if I will get one next week or not. If I do I will be seeing you sometime Saturday evening.

I think Eris is going to try and sell my car, if he hasn't already sold it. I told Helen last week to tell Eris to sell my car, for I can't keep it on the post.

When have you heard from Eddie? When you write him tell him I said hello. The next letter you write me, send his address so I can write if I can find the time. Tell Jerry and Charles hello and that I will try to answer Jerry's letter sometime this week. I don't have much time during the week to write though. Well I will close for this time hoping to get a letter soon.

"Ernest"

Letter home

Written November 2, 1950

Fort Knox, Kentucky

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello and that I am fine. How is this going to find everyone down home?

Well I thought I would write a few words while I was waiting to go to the football game. We all have to go to a football game in a few minutes.

Say don't look for me too much but there is a slim chance that I may get a pass this week. If I do get one it will be late Saturday evening. Well, they are calling us out so I will close.

Ans. soon

Ernest

A Talk About Stationery

When you buy stationery, it means something. You want your reader to notice more than just your words and crooked cursive. Via crisp sheets of letterhead, you want to brag about where you've been and what you've been doing. You want to feel older, more mature—you've grown out of lined loose-leaf, or you've been given something else to write on.

Ernest's letters begin on 5x8-inch brown legal sheets, lined in the traditional faint blue. There are no perforations on the top edge of the paper, and there aren't even any nicks from having torn it from a pad. A large stack of this paper was probably bundled with a string and purchased at Wade's General Store down by the creek. Every once in a while, a letter will be written on plain white paper, slightly smaller and much thinner than today's standard printing sheets.

Then comes the Fort Knox stationery. Again, 5x8, but this time heavy paper with bold black printing at the top center, Fort Knox, Kentucky, and a large tank rolling over a desolate plain, blasting debris into the distance, and two helmeted snipers following behind closely. Ernest doesn't let the overbearing

letterhead speak for itself—he again dates the letter from Fort Knox and writes it a third time on the envelope. Ernest is obviously proud to be in basic training, and though it was a sad event for the family at the time, and even more tragic looking back, it was something great and adventurous to him. Something exotic. Something that didn't belong back on the farm in Decatur, like the porcelain zebra he played with as a child, its black stripes almost rubbed off from years of being told he'd never amount to anything more than a local farmer.

Later letters come on full-sized sheets of rice paper, thin enough to use for tracing. Another set comes on American Red Cross stationery, which was probably given out on the front lines, rather than purchased like the Fort Knox kind. Ernest writes mostly in pencil, his looping letters becoming more stressed and tight as the situation in Korea gets worse. Every so often a letter will be written in ink, one in bright green, and one where the ink runs out before he can even sign his name completely.

The envelopes change only twice, and are usually brown and no thicker than the paper. Envelopes with San Francisco as the return address have a red and blue, diagonally striped border—courtesy of the U.S. Army. Whoever opened the letters each time they arrived tore the envelope down the short side, probably shot a quick breath on the tear to make it open, and turned the envelope upside down so the letter could slide out easily, falling onto the oily kitchen table or hardwood floor.

The stamps are never fancy. Each one is deep lavender, costing three cents, with the profile of Thomas Jefferson and the dates 1801-1809 printed in white. The first change in postage comes in mid-January 1951 when Ernest sticks

two three-centers on the envelope. The next letter has a red, six-cent stamp bearing the words AIR MAIL and a picture of a jet in flight. The last change in postage occurs when Ernest has finally made his way to Korea. War mail is free. The Army doesn't want don't want soldiers worrying about little things like stamps; just give the homebound letter to your commanding officer and he'll make sure it gets into your family's hands by next week.

The letters speak the truest story of Ernest's character. Not the most eloquent sounding, but definitely concerned about the family back home and needing that to be a constant in his life, and always looking ahead to where he would end up—almost like he knew his future long before he made it there.

Letter home

Written November 20, 1950

Fort Knox, Kentucky

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello and that I am fine. How is this going to find you all?

I received your letter today was glad to hear from you. I don't need any money, you was asking about. I am going to run a little short this month, but I have some money in the bank if I should need any.

There isn't any chance of me getting out, for there has been some boys trying for the last six or eight weeks for the same thing.

There isn't any need for you worrying, for that doesn't do any good.

I think I will get a few days off during, or just after Christmas. I don't know exactly where we will be going then.

You ask if I seen Helen. I seen her on Saturday night and Sunday while I was in Cincinnati. She has been layed off from work for a week or two.

Well it is about time for the lights to go out.

Ans. soon

Ernest

Letter home

Written November 26, 1950

Fort Knox, Kentucky

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello, this cold morning, and is it really cold here.

I don't know what you will think when you hear I was in Ohio during Thanksgiving. I got a ride up there though and it didn't cost me anything for going up there. I got my car while I was up there. Well I will probably see you over the weekend if I am not on duty and I can get another pass. If I know for sure in time to let Helen know she is going to come down home.

I am very sure I will get a few days off during Christmas or New Year. Say I don't guess I will be able to buy anything much for Christmas this year, but if I don't get to before I will have an enlarged picture made when I am home. I want to get Helen something, but I haven't decided what I will get. She said she told her mother she didn't guess she would be home much during Christmas, so I guess she will be down home. Ha.

Well I don't know much to write so I will close for this time.

Ans. soon

Ernest

Sending (or Calling) Home Some Hope

Being an only child myself, I can't exactly relate to Ernest's family dynamic. However, I know what it's like to be away from a parent whose only wish is for her baby to come home. During busy weeks at college when I couldn't take the time to make a visit home, I would say to my mom over the phone, "I'll be home soon. Really. I might even get a chance to come home for a few hours on Saturday afternoon, if I get all my homework done early." Then the inevitable—I finish my homework, but a friend asks me to go to the movies, or a concert, and suddenly my social life seems much more important than getting to talk face to face with my mother for a very short few hours. So, when Ernest chose Cincinnati and having a good time with his girlfriend Helen, I understood. I call my mom back and have to tell her, "The opportunity came up, and, well, it didn't cost me anything, so...Don't worry, I'm sure I'll be able to make it home next weekend, Mom, when I have less homework." Sixty years separate me from my great-uncle Ernest, but I'm beginning to feel that our bond has grown just a little bit closer.

Letter home

Written December 1, 1950

Fort Knox, Kentucky

Hello Jerry;

Just a few lines to say hello. How is this going to find you and all the rest?

Boy it sure has been cold here for the last few days, but it is some warmer now.

Well how is school these days and how are you likeing by now? Tell Charles not to get too many whippings just before Christmas.

I thought I would be getting a pass this week but there isn't going to be any passes given out. I hope I will get one before Christmas but it doesn't look likely.

Well ans. soon Jerry.

As ever a bro.

Ernest

Letter home

Written December 3, 1950

Fort Knox, Kentucky

Dear Dad and Mom;

How is this going to find everyone, and what have you been doing these days?

Well there wasn't any passes this weekend, and I don't know if there will be this next weekend or not, but if I do get one I will see you sometime Saturday evening, or night. I will have that picture taken when I am home sometime during Christmas.

Say here is one that was taken in the mess hall, it isn't very good though. Well I will close for this time.

Ans. soon

Ernest

Letter home

Written December 17, 1950

Fort Knox, Kentucky

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello. How is this going to find everyone? Well I am going out on bivouac in the morning. I don't know if we will be out during Christmas or not. I am yet planning on seeing you all during New Year. It will only be a weekend pass, but I am pretty sure of getting one then. Well I don't guess I will write until we get back in camp, so have a big Christmas and ans. soon.

"Ernest"

Bivouac

According to my word-processing dictionary, a bivouac is a very simple temporary camp that is set up and used by soldiers or mountaineers; a short stay, usually overnight, often with minimum equipment. This word had never entered my vocabulary until I read it in Ernest's handwriting.

Letter home

Written December 26, 1950

Fort Knox, Kentucky

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello, how is this going to find everyone?

I got the box of candy you send, was glad to get it. Well I will be seeing you all Saturday if nothing happens. We graduate from basic Thursday. I will be at home for a few days. We have from the 30th until the 22nd of January to report to Seattle Washington. That will give me about two weeks at home. You can be expecting Helen down about Friday, she is going to go down with Eris if they go down.

Say what would you all think about the idea of me getting married while I am home? I don't I will but if I should. Don't say anything about this to anyone for I know what they would say. Well I will close for this time, ans. soon. If you don't answer in time for me to hear before Saturday don't write for I will be home during the weekend.

Ernest

Letters While Waiting

Patience must have become one of Ernest's strengths by 1951. He had been waiting since 1946 to get to this point, and now that he was finally on the brink of starting his great adventure, he had to wait some more. And while he waited, he did the only other thing besides waiting that he had done consistently for the past four years: write home.

Letter home

Postmarked January 23, 1951

Ft. Lawton

Seattle, Wash.

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello. How is this going to find everyone? I am just fine, and we got here in Seattle some time last night. I sure had a nice trip up here.

We have already gotten the clothes sorted which we are to take with us. We aren't taking near all of our clothes so I am sending what I could get in that handbag home. I have already shipped them this morning.

Tell Charles I guess I will have a chance to ride an airplane, for that is the way we are to go across. Well I yet don't know what my address will be so I will let you know as soon as possible. It isn't very cold here at Seattle, not as cold as it was at home.

Well I will close for this time as it is about time to eat dinner.

Love,

Ernest

Letter home

Postmarked January 24, 1951

Ft. Lawton

Seattle, Wash.

Dear Dad and Mom;

Well here I am writing again today.

You know the allotment I said I would have made out, well I seen them about it this afternoon. I can't get an allotment like that unless I am the whole support of one of you. In other words, they told us if you were living together we could not make an allotment like that.

I am going to make an allotment like the one Eddie has if I can't get any other kind. I will have it made out to the bank at Danville, like you all said.

Tell Eris when we comes down after the car to sell it for what ever they are selling at, for it will probably be quite a while before I will need one. He can send the money to you and you can send it to the bank or if you need any for anything go ahead and use it.

I will close for this time.

Ans. soon

Love Ernest

Letter home

Friday Evening,

January 26, 1951

(Postmarked from Seattle, Washington)

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello and that I am fine. How is this going to find everyone at home?

Well I guess we will leave out about tomorrow night or Sunday. We was issued our clothing and equipment today. I was issued a carbine, and we really was issued a nice overcoat. It wasn't like the one I had down home. We had to turn the other one in. I was the only one in my barracks that was issued a wool lined field jacket. We was going through the line for vests, and the guy looked at me and said he thought he had a jacket that would fit me. It really is nice and I think the other guys are wanted it.

Say here is a picture me and a Stevens boy from Harlan Kentucky had made last night, it isn't very good though.

Love,

Ernest

Letter home

Ft. Lawton

January 28, 1951

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello. How is this going to find everyone?

Well I haven't shipped out yet, just waiting around. They are shipping them out alphabetical order. I think they have just about got down to me.

Well you all said to write if I could where I was going. I don't know where I will be going yet, but all the rest have left out for Japan. I think they are replacements for the eighth army. I think you know where the eighth army is.

I have just got out of bed and it is ten o'clock here, that is twelve o'clock by your time. I don't much like the weather here on the coast for one day it is cold and the next day it is warm and raining.

When you write, let me know Eddie's address, I forgot it when I left the other day.

You know I said I guessed I would go over by plane well I guess I will all the other I think have gone that way.

Well I don't know much to write so I will close for this time, and write Helen a few lines.

Ans. soon

Ernest

P.S. I have a little money if I get a chance to have it fixed up I will send it home. I may send it by letter anyway if I can't no other way. I would rather risk it in a letter than to be carrying it.

Letter home

Ft. Lawton

January 30, 1951

Dear Dad and Mom;

How is this going to find everyone? What are you all doing these days, nothing much if it is as cold there as it is here.

Well I will be leaving sometime before seven in the morning. We don't know for sure what time, it may be tonight.

I haven't heard from you all or Helen either. I may get some mail though today.

When have you heard from Eddie, and what is he doing? Tell him I said hello and to write sometime. I will try to answer if I have the time.

Don't you all work too hard, and tell Papa and Mama I said hello.

Well I will close for this time and write again as soon as possible.

"Ernest"

Letter home

Ft. Lawton

January 31, 1951

Dear Dad and Mom;

Well here I am writing again. I send some money home yesterday. You can send it to the bank when it gets there for me. I sent 40.00 it will probably beat this letter there though. Well the next letter you get from me I won't be in the States. This is sure a pretty place here where the barracks are. You can stand at the window and watch the ships come into the bay.

Say have you heard from Helen since she has gone back? I haven't got any mail yet. If I don't get any today it will probably be two or three weeks before I hear from you and her. Well I will close for now.

Ans. soon

"Ernest"

P.S. My address is :

Pvt ERNEST C ROBERTSON

US 52000535

APO 613 c/o Postmaster

San Francisco, Calif.

I got my name and serial no. put on my bracelet Helen gave me.

Shipping Out

I should be scared. I'm going halfway across the world in an airplane and I should be scared to death. But somehow I'm not. Somehow, there's adventure in this and I'm excited, and I'm proud. Just a few weeks ago I was in Decatur, Kentucky, and look at me now. I've ridden across the country and seen the Pacific coast, and now I'm getting on an airplane to Korea. I feel like I oughta be an old man by now, having seen so much so young.

Letter home

February 6, 1951

(Postmarked U. S. Army Postal Service)

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello and that I am thinking of you all. How is this going to find everyone?

What have you been doing these days? Working at something though I guess. I haven't heard from any of you yet. I will be glad when I get some mail from you all and Helen too.

I have just finished writing her a few lines and thought while I had time I would write you.

Tell Jerry and Charles I said hello and not to learn too much in school.

Write and tell me if you got the money I send home. I will probably send a little more the first chance I get. I don't know but I may want you to send me some cigarettes, if I do I will let you know and you can write a check on me enough to get them and mail them. Say did you get the clothes I send home yet? If I had known it I would have left most all of them at home. We had to turn most all of them in for others. Well I will close for now hoping to hear from you soon.

Love

"Ernest"

Mail Call

By the time the mail made it out to Wallace Robertson's house it was late afternoon. Most of the day's work had already been done, Charles and Jerry had returned home from school, and Gladys was heating the supper. In their younger years, Charles (my grandfather) and his sister Jerry would fight over who got to check the tin mailbox stilted on a double-thick tobacco stick, but these days, mail call was solemn. Every day the box held a possible fate for their older brother Ernest and for the family who missed him dearly.

Ernest's letters from Korea were steady and assuring, telling mom and dad, brother and sister that he was still alive and at least in a capacity in which he was able to write. As thoughtlessly as the postman stuffed any old piece of mail, like a Sears & Roebuck catalog, from which everything was too expensive to be ordered, or an overdue loan notice from Farmers Bank, a thin, rice envelope would be placed in the Robertsons' mailbox every two or three days. Of course it

meant nothing to the man who delivered it, but to the family who salivated over opening it at the dinner table rather than over the food before them, one preciously sealed document meant very much.

Every evening began the same way: the screen door slapping against a wood frame as Wallace came in from the field, dirt caked and greasy. Charles and Jerry, who sat at the kitchen table writing out their times tables, waited for the sound of running water from the back porch faucet where their father washed his hands to signal one or both of them to make the trip to the mailbox and back in silence. It had become a funny sort of game for the two, trying to walk to the box slowly enough out of respect for the image of their heroic brother but still make it back to the table before Wallace entered the kitchen, as though in a childish race. “Mail today?” Wallace asked when he came in, trying to sound casual despite the grit and tears in his chest, and was answered either with a regretfully pursed lip from Jerry or a handing over of the envelope that miraculously made its way 7,000 plus miles across the globe.

In his penmanship that varied from languid to stiff depending on what kind of day he had, Ernest’s letters spoke of being “just fine” despite the bitter Korean weather. At times the family sitting around the table allowed smiles to peek through their broken hearts as the letter was read by Gladys, “It sure is cold here. They gave us long coats today though, and the guy passing them out gave me one of the better ones. Better coat than I’ve ever had. Real warm.” And another, just after arriving in Korea, said, “They give us plenty of cigarettes here, more than you could ever want. And free, too. Wish I could send some home to Dad. Don’t guess they’d let me do that.”

As soon as Gladys finished reading the letter, she handed it to Jerry who, though she desperately wanted to read it herself, gave it to Wallace to read first. Then it was passed back to Jerry, and then finally to Ernest's youngest sibling, Charles. A few hours of calm would set in after the letter was read, everyone having reason to hope that Ernest was alive and would be coming home soon. And though they knew in the backs of their minds that the letter had been written days ago and anything could have happened to him during the time it took the Decatur Post Office to receive and deliver the letters, the Robertsons felt it was acceptable to mildly enjoy the evening.

But as each one lay down to sleep at night, the calm and relief from earlier began to fade, keeping the mother, whose son she could not comfort, and the father, who could impart no more knowledge about becoming a man, awake with aching fears. Sometime during sleep their minds would drift to parts of life that did not have to do with Ernest, and so upon waking the next morning it was almost as though he were just across the hallway, sleeping in his creaky bed covered in patchwork quilts. Then with the coffee's strong aroma snapping their minds into motion, worry and dull throbbing started again, and could only be masked by busy work until the next mail call.

Letter home

February 9, 1951

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello. How is this going to find everyone? What are you all doing these days? You know I haven't heard from any of you since I came

back. I got two letters from Eddie while I was at Ft. Lawton. Have you heard from him lately? Tell Jerry and Charles I said hello. How is the weather there? It is pretty cold here where I am.

Well I will close for this time hoping to hear from you soon. I will try and write Helen a few lines.

Write soon,

Love Ernest

24th Div.

Taegue

Taegue

Taegue was Ernest's secret. It was that piece of gossip that your best friend tells you on the condition that you'll stick a needle in your eye before you pass it on to someone else—so juicy that all the needles in the world look dull, and therefore no longer threatening. As a trusted soldier of the United States Army, Ernest wasn't supposed to give away his location, but this was too large to keep to himself. Taegue, or Taegu as it is correctly spelled, is actually the third largest city in South Korea, and in his desperate attempt to reach out to Dad and Mom halfway across the globe, Ernest divulged his secret.

Letter home

February 12, 1951

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines this morning to say hello. How is this going to find everyone at home? Just fine I hope. I hope it isn't snowing there the way it is here. It isn't too cold this morning just cold enough to come a big snow.

Have you heard from Helen lately? I haven't heard from anyone since I left home, except Eddie.

What have you all been doing these days, making plant bed though I guess. Tell everyone I said hello and not to work too hard. Well I will close for this time as I can't think of anything much to write.

Love

"Ernest"

P.S. I got five packs of cigarettes and three or four boxes of candy yesterday.

They gave us all some cigarettes and candy. I don't know much use for the candy though. Ha.

Letter home

Unknown Postmark Date

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello. How is this going to find everyone, fine I hope.

We have been getting the rest of our equipment. I guess you all are in bed asleep now. It is four o'clock in the evening here, but it is two o'clock in the morning at home.

I will be glad when I start getting mail. I haven't heard from anyone since I have been over here. I am sure glad Eddie is where he is, and has it as easy as he does.

Tell everyone hello and to write sometime. I will answer if I can get the time to.

Well I don't know anything much to write, so don't work too hard, and don't worry for I am O.K.

Love

Ernest

P.S. You said you wanted to know.

Postscript

This letter is one of my favorites. For security purposes in strained times, some soldiers are not allowed to reveal their location during contact with anyone outside their unit, including family back home who probably wouldn't know the difference. But Ernest, who had been swept out of the undertow by a strong wave headed for the coast of Korea, was so desperate to connect with Dad or Mom that he wrote the letters K-O-R-E-A all scrambled up onto different corners of the sheet of paper. Then, when his readers noticed the cryptic message, they would be able to make sense of it via the all-important postscript.

Letter home

"Valentines Day"

February 14, 1951

Dear Dad and Mom;

How is this going to find everyone on Valentines Day, just fine I hope. It is night though here. I have just finished eating supper a few minutes ago.

I went out and traded some candy they gave me for some candles. I am in my tent writing this by candle light now. Two candles lights this tent up good though. I think my buddy is out trading with the kids now. He sure likes to trade with them.

Say I want you to send me a box of stationery. I will probably be out before I get it anyway. That is one thing I can't get. The war will probably be over though by the time I get it. Ha. I yet haven't got any mail from any of you or Helen either.

About all of the boys I went through basic with are all separated. Most of us got split up before we left Japan. I am yet with three or four of them though.

Well I will close for this time hoping to hear from you soon.

Love

Ernest

Letter home

February 19, 1951

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello. How is this going to find everyone? What is everyone doing these days?

Say when you get to writing to this address put some paper and an envelope in each letter you write. I can't get any paper. I think when you write to this address I will get the mail sooner. I haven't yet got any mail.

Say if anything should happen get in touch with the red cross or the adjutant General at Washington D.C. and I could come home. I am with a machine gun company. It is pretty rough but I think I will make it if the other guys do. Well I will close for this time. Don't work too hard and write soon.

Love,

Ernest

Letter home

Sat. Eve.

Sometime in late February 1951

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello. How is this going to find everyone?

They say they don't censor our letters, I don't know if they do or not.

I am about twenty miles southeast of Seoul. I hope I hear from you all soon. I haven't yet heard from anyone.

Well take care of yourself and don't work too hard.

Ans. soon

Love Ernest

P.S. You can keep track with the 24th division and tell about where I am.

Being Ornery

Ernest was getting frustrated. I can see it in his writing.

After reading his letters over and over, I begin to feel the tension in his voice, the stress of his grip on the pen. He was running out of stationery, he had been separated from his buddies, and he hadn't heard from anyone back home in over a month. Something real was coming out in Ernest's letters—something that carried more weight than the "I am doing just fine" chitchat. I don't believe that pulling the trigger of his machine gun or writing a letter home was an outlet for expression of his thoughts and feelings. Actually, many of his letters seem almost emotionless, starting and ending the exact same way each time. What made him keep writing was not the urge to tell someone about his day; instead, it was a touch, a reaching out, a yearning for contact. Ernest needed those largely identical letters to make it to the Robertson's mailbox, and he needed to receive replies to have the sense that someone knew where he was, and that someone cared enough to write him back. His grand adventure didn't seem to be turning out the way he had planned, and all of a sudden Decatur, Kentucky, was looking pretty darn good to him.

Letter home

March 2, 1951

—Korea

Hello Jerry;

How is this going to find you? Just fine I hope. I guess you are yet going to school you and Charles.

What is everyone doing in Russell County these days?

I have just finished writing Helen a letter. I wrote one to Dad and Mom before I went to supper a while ago. Boy this is sure some place to be in. It is the most dirty country I have ever seen. What houses and buildings are left are about the size and shape of those on the ridge. Except they are made out of mud with straw roofs. My squad and I are using one of these houses for the next two nights. We are going to move out Sunday. We found an old phonograph and some records. One of the boys is over in the corner of the building playing it. He has been playing it practically all evening. Ha. He asked a few minutes ago who I was writing to now, I told him I was writing to you so he said to tell you to write him a letter. Ha. He is about Eddie's age, and is he a character. Here is his name and serial number if you should want to write him a few lines. The address is same as mine. George Eckert RA21770724.

Has Recty been coming home about every week? Tell her I said hello and to write sometime. I will try to answer the first chance I get. I hope I start getting mail soon, for I haven't heard from anyone since I left home.

I can't hardly write this letter for the noise in this shack. The guys are arguing about the army, about the pay, insurance, chow and everything else. Ha.

Well I can't think of anything else to write so I will close for now.

Ans. soon

A bro.

Ernest

George Eckert

Before Ernest's letters were passed on to me, my mother took a significant interest in researching her uncle's life during his time in Korea, as well as his death. Lifting the words "George Eckert" from one of Ernest's letters to Jerry, my mom typed the mystery name into an internet search, where she came up with a long list of addresses at which she would try to contact the George Eckert that Ernest was talking about.

Mom wrote letters to over seventy men named George Eckert who could have been the one. In her pretty handwriting and blue ink, she wrote:

Mr. Eckert or family,

I am searching for the George Eckert who served in the Korean War. My uncle served with a George Eckert – serial #RA21770724.

My uncle's name was Ernest C. Robertson, he was from a small town in Russell Springs, Kentucky. He was killed in Korea April 23 or May 5th 1951.

If you happen to be the George Eckert, would you please contact me. I have enclosed a stamped envelope for your convenience. If you are not, I am sorry to have bothered you.

Thank you,

Vicki S. Robertson Grider

Most of her letters were never returned, and those that did come back held little promise of further information. However, during her search of online sites with people who researched Korean War history for a living, Mom ran into a man named Harry H. Reed II, who was able to send her an electronic version of a photo taken in Korea—Ernest was in the photo. M Company, 19th Infantry, 24th

Division. Ernest's exact coordinates. And, there he is, in the back row, having gained a few pounds and holding a can. My great uncle, on the desolate plains of Korea, so very far away from home.

Letter home

March 2, 1951

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello. How is this going to find everyone? Just fine I hope.

I am just fine, only it is a little cool over here again today. Yesterday it was warm and the sun was shining. Today it has been cold and snowing a little.

What are you all doing these days? I wish I would hear from someone soon. I haven't got any letters yet. I did get the carton of cigarettes you sent though. I was glad to get them but don't send any more unless I let you know. I think I will get enough along to do me now.

I guess you know about where the 24th division is. I think we are going to cross the Han River day after tomorrow, which will be Sunday. Every day over here is just the same to us though.

I guess they started taking out the \$50.00 a month out of my pay. I am going to send home another money order the first chance I get. It will probably be about \$50.00. I haven't spent anything since I left Japan. There isn't anything to buy or anyplace to go. I think I have bought six candy bars since I got here. That was about four weeks ago.

When have you heard from Helen? Well I will close for this time.

Answer soon

Love

Ernest

Letter home

March 16, 1951

—Korea

Hello Jerry;

Just a few lines this afternoon to say hello. How is this going to find everyone at home? As for me I am o.k. I guess.

I haven't been doing anything all day except sitting around the fire talking and making coffee. It isn't very good entertainment but I like it better than what we have been doing for the last few days.

I got a letter from you and Helen this morning. I have got several letter in the last few days, most of them was wrote the first of last month.

Tell Charles I said not to work to hard since school is out. I don't think he will though. Ha.

I got another hair cut this morning, another short one at that. I am afraid to get out in the sun without my cap for I would get sunburned.

What do you and Recty do over the weekends now? Go into the Russell Springs though I guess. I would sure like to go into town again over the weekend. Well I will close for now as it is about time to eat. I think I have gained about thirty pounds since I was home.

Answer soon,

“Ernest”

Letter home

March 26, 1951

—Korea

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines this afternoon to say hello. How is this going to find everyone?

I have just been fooling around all day. We are waiting now to go in reserve. I think we will go tomorrow, but I don't know how long that will last. Not long though I imagine.

Well did everyone have a big time Easter, that was yesterday here. It wasn't much of an Easter here, it rained all day and most all the night.

Say this paper sure is dirty for I have been carrying it in my pocket now for sometime.

We will probably get paid when we go in reserve, if I do I am going to send some money home, if I can fix up a money order.

I will be glad to get in reserve so I can see a newspaper. Some say we are going across the 38th, you can hear anything here though.

I think we are within about six or even miles of it now. I think if we don't that this will be over soon. Well I will close for this time.

Answer soon,

Love

Ernest

The Beginning of the End

Ernest's last letters are filled with hope and despair, both ringing true simultaneously. To have been so close to the 38th Parallel, a place we still associate with great peril, must have shaken Ernest to the core. But at the same time, the possibility of getting to go into the reserves and have the opportunity to see something as normal and stable as a newspaper would have been a grand escape from the realities of life on the front line.

Letter home

March 28, 1951

—Korea

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello. How is this going to find everyone? Just fine I hope. As for me I am O.K.

I got a letter from Helen and Eddie this morning. His letter was wrote the 12th. We haven't done very much today except heat rations and eat. I have plenty to eat, especially when we go back in reserve. I am writing this from the top of a hill which it took us most of the day yesterday to climb.

I got a picture of Helen the other day. It is a small one just like the one back at home.

Tell papa and mama I said hello, and to write sometime.

Well don't work too hard and write often.

Ans. soon

Ernest

Cordiality

Ernest had to have known that his situation was worsening, but nevertheless, he wrote home as regularly as he could get his hands to a pen and paper. I wonder if he chose to write home instead of keeping his thoughts in a journal for the fact that he knew they would be kept safe back in little Decatur, or whether his epistles were simply a function of call and response. In any event, Ernest's letters always have a touch of cordiality—saying those things that must be said to keep everyone happy, like “Well, don't work too hard,” but never have any real feeling behind them.

Letter home

April 5, 1951

—Korea

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines this afternoon to say hello. What is everyone doing around home these days? Working and going to school though I guess. Tell Charles I said not to farm too hard, and that I will answer his letter the next time I get in the mood for writing. This makes four letters I have written this afternoon.

The captain gave us this afternoon off to write letters or anything we want to do, most everyone is sleeping I think.

Also tell Jerry I would send a birthday card, but they don't have them over here. Ha. The boy got her letter. I think he answered it today.

You asked if I was yet with the same division, yes I am with the 24th.

Say I have been P.F.C. since about the second week I was over here, and didn't know it until we came back in reserve. We are yet in reserve but probably won't be very long now.

I was issued my combat Infantry badge today. This isn't much of a place to wear it though.

Say does it sound like in the news that they will ever get this settled over here.

We don't ever hear anything hardly. I could almost throw a rock from where we are to the 38th parallel though.

I am going to try and write some of Uncle George's if I can ever get started.

Well I will close for this time hoping to hear form you soon.

Love, "Ernest"

A Voice Emerges

Until April, Ernest had largely concealed his voice from Dad and Mom, mostly letting it show through only in letters to Jerry, a younger sibling who might have been just a touch more relatable. Still, Ernest made a breakthrough, telling his parents where he was, how he rarely heard any information about how the war was playing out, and how he wasn't exactly in the mood to write another

letter to his youngest brother Charles. Admitting that getting military things settled didn't seem like a prosperous action, Ernest may have wished he could have kept some of his belongings with him, instead of sending them home to make room for wool-lined jackets and ammunition. If nothing else, it would have been nice to touch a worn-in, flannel button-down shirt, or smell the charred red plastic of his box that held an unopened pack of cigarettes, just to feel like life was back to normal.

Letter home

April 8, -51

—Korea

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello. How is this going to find everyone? As for me I am O.K. It is a little cool over here today.

I haven't heard from any of you for several days now. I got a letter from Helen this morning. I also got a letter from Eris today.

I think they have got the rotation started. Some of the guys that have been over here since last July are going back to the states this month.

Well I don't know anything much to write so I will close for this time.

Ans. soon

Love Ernest

Homesick

If I were feeling homesick, this is the kind of letter I would write. Short, bland, maybe even a little self-pitying. Sure, Ernest had buddies with him, but he was nowhere near the people he truly loved, and he was missing out on going to the show on Saturday night with Helen, or eating pinto beans and cornbread at his mother's supper table. I can feel Ernest treading water in his vast ocean, desperately trying to find his familiar undertow before losing strength and drowning.

Letter home

April 16, 1951

—Korea

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to say hello and that I am fine. How is this going to find everyone at home? I guess it is about time to be planting corn isn't it?

I got the letter saying that Helen wanted the money I owed her. Yes, twenty dollars was the amount which I owed her.

Say you don't have to send paper and envelopes, for we get enough paper and writing supplies to do us.

And Jerry mentioned in her letter that was written the 28th of February that you all was sending me some cigarettes. I don't know if that was the ones I got or now, but don't send any more. There is about as many cigarettes wasted now as there is used. We get them free and from one to two packs a day. I wish Dad had part of what cigarettes I get now.

Well there is quite a few of the boys leaving from over here now. Part of them are going to the states and some to Japan. I hope I am out of here before next winter if it does last that long. Well I will close for now.

Ans. soon

Love

Ernest

Dear John

The Dear John letter is one you'd rather not receive. It tells you that the time you spent with the writer was nice, and that it isn't your fault, really. It's just that, well, you're so far away now, and I've got other people to get on with. I'd really like to have the money you owed me, and I sure hope there aren't any hard feelings. Well, I'll be thinking of you, and drop me a line if ever you want.

Not the kind of letter you want to get, especially in front of your buddies, especially in the midst of a war, especially when there's absolutely nothing you can do about it.

Letter home

April 17, 1951

—Korea

Hello Ed;

Just a few lines this morning to say hello. How is this going to find you and what are you doing these days?

Have you gone to the hospital yet? If so, how are you getting along?

I got a letter from Jerry yesterday. She said their school would soon be out. I wish I was yet going to school, how about you?

Boy things seem to be getting worse over here all the time. I guess you have heard about the rotation, they have set up now, haven't you? If they yet have it, by winter I hope to be out of here. There is quite a few of the boys leaving for the states and to Japan, who have been here since last July.

I am going to try and if I can transfer into the 75mm platoon. I believe I would rather be in that than with the machine guns. I don't much like the idea of having a helmet creased with a machine gun bullet. That's what happened about three days ago.

Well Ed I will close for this time, and try to write again soon.

Ans. soon

Love Ernest

Followed by Silence

How can Dad and Mom respond to letters when they've stopped coming?

The old mailbox,
crafted by *Ernest* himself,
sitting empty,
one day, two days, three,
one week, two weeks,
too long.

On that first day, nothing seemed different.
Wallace wasn't expecting a letter anyway—too soon.
The routine took about three or four days.
Ernest wrote a letter on Monday,
put it in the mail that afternoon,
and went about life in war
until Thursday when he would write another
just about the same time the first was arriving home.

Dad and Mom wouldn't have even known if something had happened during the middle of the letter cycle.
They were just waiting for the next letter.

But it never came.

Day one
tobacco gets cut,
triggers get pulled.

Day three
supper still gets put on the table
and butterflies in the stomach are calmed by "We'll hear from him tomorrow,"
but blood-creased helmets are pulled off of Kentucky boys' heads
and eyes are paralyzed in fear.

Day five
maybe he's just not able to write today
surely he's just fine,
maybe they'll let me out
surely I'll get to go home.

One week
worry setting in,
cold sweats, and hard breathing.

Followed by silence.

Letters from Someone Else

I can't help but wonder if either Wallace or Gladys, or even Jerry, knew deep within themselves what had happened to Ernest during the time that no mail was addressed in their son and brother's handwriting. The last of April, through May and June of 1951 stood still in time; the only thing that made the days go by were the heavy waves of agony and pinpricks of pain and worry.

Department of the Army

Office of the Adjutant General

Washington, D. C.

29 June 1951

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Robertson:

I am referring to your recent letter concerning your son, Private First Class Ernest C. Robertson, who has been missing in action since 23 April 1951.

I realize your concern for the safety of your loved one, and I regret that up to this time no additional report has been received concerning him. I wish to assure you, however, that the military authorities overseas are engaged in a constant and untiring effort to determine the status of individuals who are missing from their units. When conditions permit, comrades of the missing persons are interrogated and an active search is instituted. This search, which is begun by the individual's company commander in the immediate area of the disappearance, is as exhaustive as possible. It is continued up through the theater level, where various hospital reports, prisoner of war reports, and reports of individuals who have been located by other units in the field are examined and correlated daily. Any pertinent information received is transmitted at once to this office so that the anxious families may be notified.

Permit me to extend to you my sympathy during this period of uncertainty.

Sincerely yours,

Wm. E. Bergin

Major General, USA

Clippings

News didn't travel as fast as it does today, especially not for the Robertsons. Wallace couldn't check the latest news feed on CNN.com and Gladys couldn't make trips into town each day to jaw with people who might have heard more information about the boys in Korea. All they had were their letters, and the newspaper.

Any newspaper they could get their hands on they read front to back, and through again. With her large, black-handled scissors, Gladys neatly snipped columns out of the paper—anything from “13 Soldiers Released Yesterday” to “G.I. Benefits for Veterans' Families.” Of all the names of all the soldiers scrambling around in a foreign land, Gladys only saw her son's name in the paper twice: once when he was listed as Missing In Action, and another, after they received the news no parent wants to receive.

Approximately mid-August 1951

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Robertson:

I am writing you relative to your son, Private First Class Ernest C. Robertson, US52000535, Infantry, who was reported missing in action in Korea on 23 April 1951.

A report from your son's organization, Company M, 19th Infantry, reveals that he was reported missing in action following an engagement at Yonggok, North Korea on 23 April 1951. Further information has now been received indicating that he was wounded and subsequently captured. I regret to inform you that despite the attendance of a Chinese physician, your son died in Central

Korea on 6 May 1951. No further details are available. The records of the Department of the Army have, therefore, been amended to show that Private First Class Robertson died on 6 May 1951, in Central Korea, while in the hands of opposing forces, as the result of wound received in action.

The office of The Quartermaster General, Washington 25, D. C., is the office of record and the official source of information concerning overseas burials. It is customary for that office to notify the next of kin promptly upon receipt of a report of burial.

I know the sorrow this message will bring you and it is my hope that in time the knowledge of your son's sacrifices for his country may be of sustaining comfort to you.

My heartfelt sympathy is with you in your sorrow.

Sincerely yours,

Wm. E. Bergin

Major General, USA

The Adjutant General

Getting the News

I can't imagine what it is like to blindly wait and wonder about a loved one's mortality for close to four whole months, but that is exactly what the Robertson family had to do. Over the years, my family has gathered more information about Ernest's death. On one of the reports of death, a witness confirms that Ernest died by "air injection on his veins by Chinese doctor" after having been captured near Ukkandye. Another report suggests that he died from

wounds received in action, suffering from injuries to the head and spinal dislocation. Finally, a letter from the Missing Personnel Office to my grandfather states the following:

“We know that your brother was listed as a prisoner of war (POW) on April 23, 1951, while assigned to M Company, 19th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division. We do not have any specific information on the circumstances of Private Robertson’s loss incident, but the following information provides a description of his unit’s activities a the approximate time of his loss.

The 19th Infantry was fighting below the base of the Iron Triangle, Chorwan to Kumhwa, in a series of clashes that seemed to go on without end. Focal points are major battles on February 12-14 at Chipyeong-ni and around Hoengsong, and later on May 18-19 in the mountains east and west of Chunchon. Initial indications were that your brother was captured, but there are no references available to substantiate that claim. The American Battle Monuments Commission confirms an official source, which lists Private Robertson as having died of wounds (DOW) making the following scenario more plausible. During the course of continued fighting, which moved back and forth from ridge to valley in the area of Chorwan-Kumhwa, he was wounded and died in friendly hands. The aid station or MASH then had to decamp quickly as the enemy was advancing. If this was indeed the case, he may have been hastily buried, and either the remains were taken by an enemy gathering team or the grave was not relocated when the area was retaken but this can only be a best guess based on the sketchy information available.”

Whether Ernest was killed in friendly hands, or whether he suffered for two weeks with a painful injury in a POW camp before his death, I am sure that getting the news couldn't have hurt Wallace and Gladys much more than the long, drawn-out four months of agony in waiting to hear something, anything, about their oldest child.

12 September 1951

My dear Mr. Robertson

The President has requested me to inform you that the Purple Heart has been awarded posthumously to your son, Private First Class Ernest C. Robertson, Infantry, who sacrificed his life in Korea.

The medal, which you will receive in a short time, is of slight intrinsic value, but rich with the tradition for which Americans have so gallantly given their lives ever since the days of George Washington, whose profile and coat of arms adorn the medal.

Little that we can do or say will console you for the loss of your loved one. He has gone, however, in honor and in the company of patriots. Let me, in communicating to you the country's gratitude, also express to you its admiration for his valor and devotion.

Sincerely yours,

Frank Pace, Jr.

Secretary of the Army

Buying the Farm

Wallace and Gladys had been living on that same small piece of land in Decatur for close to twenty years by the time Ernest died. They started work each day when the sun came up, and they never wasted anything; nothing in their home was new, and they lived very plainly. Despite their conservative conditions, they still didn't have enough money to pay off all the debts on the farm and buy it in full. It was discouraging to live on a piece of land, work it daily, yield crops that would feed the family in more ways than one, but never actually own it—no deed with the Robertson name proudly written on the dotted line.

This was of course the case until Ernest's service in Korea, and ultimately his death. Ernest's life insurance policy came out to a total of \$10,000. Wallace was named the beneficiary.

Aside from putting the money toward other things, like a year of college for Jerry at Campbellsville University, or a new car for Eddie (the son that made it home safely), Wallace paid off his farm and house at almost \$3,000. Ernest would never be back to Decatur in a physical sense, but his soul could be found scattered about the farm on any given day. In the mailbox that he erected, in the tobacco that he used to strip, in the bottom drawer of Gladys' dresser where the remains of his belongings were kept until the day the house was sold. Because of Ernest, The Robertsons were able to soak their roots deep into the ground, the ground that they now owned, and make a permanent home.

Eddie, Jerry, and Charles all grew up and moved away with their respective spouses, but Wallace and Gladys stayed on that same plot of land for the rest of their lives. Partly, I know, because they still couldn't have afforded to

move anywhere else, but mostly, I believe, because they couldn't bear to leave what was left of their dear son Ernest.

Passing On and Passing Down

Ernest's body was never recovered from Korea. No remains, no identification tags, nothing. Over the years, some of my family members have made attempts at finding any last breath of Ernest's life. Wallace and Gladys began the search by having Robert Foley, a social service agent in Russell County, Kentucky, write letters to the government requesting any and all information pertaining to their son's disappearance and ultimate death. They mailed Ernest's dental and medical records to Washington, D.C., in the event that his body was ever found. My mother has registered his name on countless Korean War veteran websites, as well as with the government body that continues to excavate for vestiges of missing soldiers. We have yet to find a DNA sample that might help identify Ernest's remains: we cannot use the envelopes he licked closed because they are not conclusive enough, and we cannot use DNA from my grandfather or family members on our side of the family because the blood must come from the soldier's mother or her family (who, in our case, unfortunately died a year after Ernest's birth).

Beyond the sorrow and emptiness of never having seen their son again, Wallace and Gladys did not arrange to have a funeral for Ernest, therefore making it nearly impossible to gain closure from the loss. Although many moments of many days were devoted to the thought of Ernest for years

thereafter, no formal moments of silence were taken in his name, and no gravestone stands for his mark on this earth.

I never knew Ernest personally—he had been dead four decades by the time I was crawling around in Pampers. But somehow, I feel connected to him, and I think we’ve been in the same room at the same time. Few things are left of Ernest: his car was sold not long after his death, and the piece of land on which he grew up is no longer in our family. But in each letter, photo, and remnant enclosed in those beaten-up Reebok shoeboxes, my family and I remember an entire life of a boy from Decatur.

Appendix

The following is a sampling of photographs, letters, and documents pertaining to Ernest's life. By considering the age and originality of these relics, one can gain a greater sense of the reality, humanity, and tragedy of this story.

COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY
 State Department of Health, Louisville, Ky. BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS
 NO. 55982
 CERTIFIED PHOTOSTATIC COPY OF
 RECORD of BIRTH

PLACE OF BIRTH		COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY	
County of <u>Russell</u>		STATE BOARD OF HEALTH	
City of <u>Well</u>		Bureau of Vital Statistics	
In Town of		CERTIFICATE OF BIRTH	
City of		Registration District No. <u>1324</u> File No. <u>26435</u>	
Ward		Primary Registration District No. <u>7363</u> Registered No. <u>15</u>	
If birth occurs in a hospital or other institution, give name of same, instead of street and number.			
1 FULL NAME OF CHILD <u>Ernest Robertson</u>			
Sex of child <u>male</u>	4 Legitimate? <u>yes</u>	5 Twin, Triplet or other? <u>To be answered in case of plural births only</u>	6 Number in order of birth
7 Date of birth <u>May 5</u> 19 <u>27</u>		(Month) (Day) (Year)	
FATHER		MOTHER	
10 FULL NAME <u>Wm. W. Robertson</u>		14 FULL NAME <u>Mollie Edwards</u>	
11 POST OFFICE <u>Humble</u>		15 POST OFFICE <u>Humble Ky</u>	
12 COLOR OR RACE <u>white</u>		16 COLOR OR RACE <u>white</u>	
13 BIRTHPLACE <u>Ky</u>		17 BIRTHPLACE <u>Ky</u>	
18 OCCUPATION <u>Farmer</u>		19 OCCUPATION <u>Housework</u>	
20 Number of child of this mother <u>1</u>		21 Number of children of this mother, now living <u>1</u>	
22 CERTIFICATE OF ATTENDING PHYSICIAN OR MIDWIFE			
I hereby certify that I attended the birth of this child, and that it occurred on <u>May 5</u> 19 <u>27</u> at <u>8:30 PM</u>			
When there was no attending physician or midwife, then the father, mother, householder, etc., should make this return.		23 Was this child born alive? <u>yes</u>	
(Signature) <u>J. B. Hester</u>		(Physician or Midwife)	
Period of utero gestation		Address <u>Russell Springs Ky</u>	
Name of stillbirth (If Known)		24 Filed <u>June 9, 1927</u> <u>J. F. Blackerby</u> Registrar	

I, J. F. Blackerby, State Registrar of Vital Statistics, hereby certify that the above is a true and correct photostatic copy of the certificate of birth of the person therein named, and that the original certificate is registered under the above file number.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto subscribed my name and caused the official seal of the State Board of Health to be fixed at Louisville, Kentucky, this 13 day of Dec, 1927.

J. F. Blackerby
 J. F. Blackerby, State Registrar
 852518 852518

Ernest's Birth Certificate



Top left, photo of the Robertson Family (left to right: Eddie, Charles, Ernest, Wallace, Gladys, Jerry); top right, Ernest as a young boy; bottom, photo of Decatur landscape.

Prepare in Duplicate

Local Board No. 147	52
Russell County	207
	147
Jamestown, Kentucky	

(LOCAL BOARD DATE STAMP WITH CODE)



May 2, 1946

(Date of mailing)

ORDER TO REPORT FOR INDUCTION

The President of the United States,

To Ernest Clifford Robertson
 (First name) (Middle name) (Last name)

Order No. 11,533

GREETING:

Having submitted yourself to a local board composed of your neighbors for the purpose of determining your availability for training and service in the land or naval forces of the United States, you are hereby notified that you have now been selected for training and service therein.

You will, therefore, report to the local board named above at Local Draft Board Office
Jamestown, Kentucky
 (Place of reporting)

at 6:00 a. m., on the 14th day of May, 1946
 (Hour of reporting)

This local board will furnish transportation to an induction station. You will there be examined, and, if accepted for training and service, you will then be inducted into the land or naval forces.

Persons reporting to the induction station in some instances may be rejected for physical or other reasons. It is well to keep this in mind in arranging your affairs, to prevent any undue hardship if you are rejected at the induction station. If you are employed, you should advise your employer of this notice and of the possibility that you may not be accepted at the induction station. Your employer can then be prepared to replace you if you are accepted, or to continue your employment if you are rejected.

Willful failure to report promptly to this local board at the hour and on the day named in this notice is a violation of the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, as amended, and subjects the violator to fine and imprisonment.

If you are so far removed from your own local board that reporting in compliance with this order will be a serious hardship and you desire to report to a local board in the area of which you are now located, go immediately to that local board and make written request for transfer of your delivery for induction, taking this order with you.

Harold B. White

Member or clerk of the local board.

May 2, 1946, Order to Report for Armed Forces Induction

OHIO BUREAU OF UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION 427 CLEVELAND AVE., COLUMBUS 16, OHIO
 BUC-406-REV.-2-48. SEPARATION REPORT FOR TOTAL UNEMPLOYMENT

1. EMPLOYER'S NAME, ADDRESS AND BUREAU OF UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION NUMBER
 CARTHAGE MILLS INC.
 124 W. 66th ST.
 CINCINNATI 15, OHIO
 A-227-007478-31

2. WORKER'S NAME AND SOCIAL SECURITY ACCOUNT NUMBER
 Ernest Robertson 268-26-9031
 31 De Camp Ave.
 Cincinnati 15, Ohio

3. LAST DAY WORKED December 16, 1948
 MONTH DAY YEAR

4. EARNINGS IN CALENDAR WEEK IN WHICH SEPARATION OCCURRED \$ over 21.00

5. Reason for Separation ☐ Lack of Work—☐ Illness: Expected to Return to Employment
☐ Illness: Not Expected to Return to Employment ☐ Other (explain fully)
 Joined the U. S. Army

6. TOTAL EARNINGS SINCE LAST HIRED (IF LESS THAN \$84.00) (See Item 6—Instruction Sheet) over 84.00

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE FACTS HEREIN STATED ARE TRUE AND CORRECT

SIGNATURE DATE TITLE
 12./21/48 Payroll Clerk

ADDRESS (IF DIFFERENT FROM ITEM 1.) (IMPORTANT: SEE REVERSE SIDE)

Ernest's leave slip from work at Carthage Mills Inc.



A photo of Ernest taken on one of his last visits home

301 Walnut St.
Elmwood Place
Cincinnati 16, O.

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines to
say hello and to let you
know that everyone up
here is o.k.

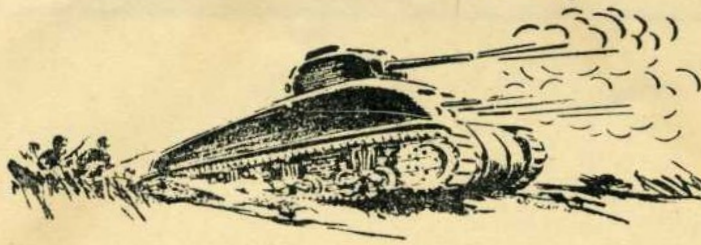
well I got a job and
started working in the
same department with
Eris. I started working
Tuesday morning.

I was over at Lees'
for a while last night,
they are all well.

I guess I will stay with
Eris as we go to work at
the same time. ans. soon
Ernest

Letter home, written while working in Cincinnati; circa 1947

Fort Knox, Kentucky



Fort Knox, Ky.
Dec. 26, 1950

Dear Dad and Mom;
Just a few lines to say hello,
how is this going to find every
one?

I got the box of candy you
sent, was glad to get it. well
I will be seeing you all
saturday if nothing happens.
we graduate from basic thursday.
I will be at home for a
few days. we leave from the
30th until the 22nd of January
to report to Seattle Washington.
That will give me about two
weeks at home. you can be
expecting Helen down about Liden.

Letter home from Fort Knox, Kentucky; December 26, 1950



AMERICAN RED CROSS

April 5, 1951
— Korea

Dear Dad and Mom;

Just a few lines this afternoon to say hello, what is everyone doing around home these days? Working and going to school though I guess. Tell Charles I said not to farm too hard, and that I will answer his letter the next time I get in the mood for writing. This makes four letters I have written this afternoon.

The Captain gave us this afternoon off to write letters or anything we want to do, most everyone is sleeping I think.

FORM 539 A

Ernest C. Robertson Missing In Action

Pfc. Ernest C. Robertson 24 years old, son of Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Robertson, of Webbs Cross Roads, was reported to his parents in a telegram received last Friday that he had been missing in action in Korea since April 2.

He was serving with the 24th Infantry Division of the 8th army as a machine gunner. He entered the army in September, 1950, and received his 14 weeks' training at Fort Knox, and had been in action since February of this year.

He was a graduate of Russell Springs high school with the class of 1947, and prior to his induction into the army he was employed by Globe Warnicke Co., Cincinnati, Ohio.

One of the last letters home from Korea; April 5, 1951,
and a clipping saved by Gladys

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Robertson:

I am writing you relative to your son, Private First Class Ernest C. Robertson, US52000535, Infantry, who was reported missing in action in Korea on 23 April 1951.

A report from your son's organization, Company M, 19th Infantry, reveals that he was reported missing in action following an engagement at Yonggok, North Korea on 23 April 1951. Further information has now been received indicating that he was wounded and subsequently captured. I regret to inform you that despite the attendance of a Chinese physician, your son died in Central Korea on 6 May 1951. No further details are available. The records of the Department of the Army have, therefore, been amended to show that Private First Class Robertson died on 6 May 1951, in Central Korea, while in the hands of opposing forces, as the result of wounds received in action.

The office of The Quartermaster General, Washington 25, D.C., is the office of record and the official source of information concerning overseas burials. It is customary for that office to notify the next of kin promptly upon receipt of a report of burial.

I know the sorrow this message will bring you and it is my hope that in time the knowledge of your son's sacrifice for his country may be of sustaining comfort to you.

My heartfelt sympathy is with you in your sorrow.

Sincerely yours,

Wm. E. Bargin
WM. E. BERGIN
Major General, USA
The Adjutant General

1 Incl.

DA Pamphlet No. 20-15

Letter to inform Ernest's family of his death